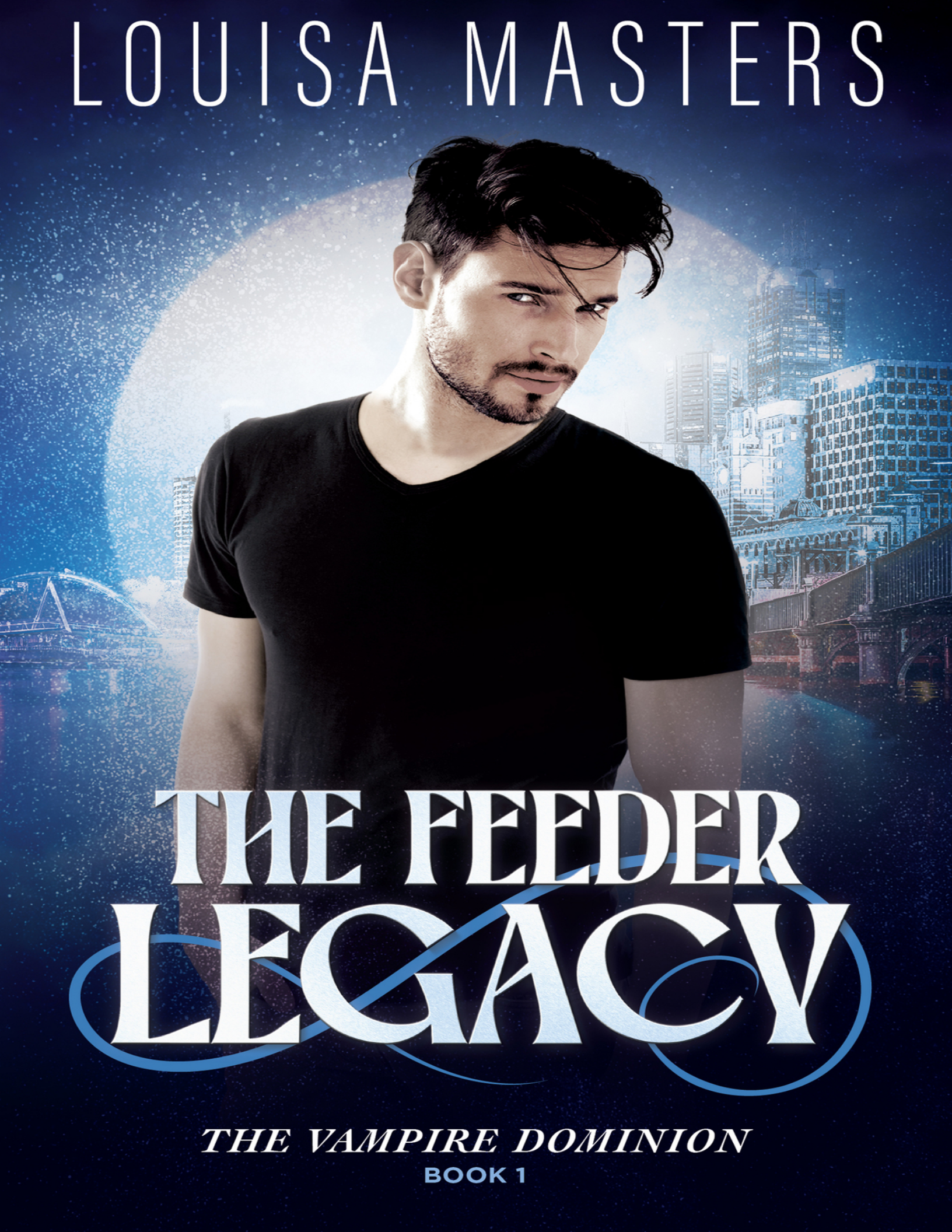
LOUISA MASTERS



THE FEEDER LEGACY

THE VAMPIRE DOMINION

BOOK 1

The Feeder Legacy

The Vampire Dominion

Book One

Louisa Masters

OceanofPDF.com

The Feeder Legacy

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Author's Note

I don't often set books in my homeland, but this time, I couldn't resist. *The Feeder Legacy* takes place in Australia (mostly Melbourne), and Adam is a true-blue Aussie bloke.

This means there are some Aussie words and phrases sprinkled throughout the story, and the spelling is all in Australian English. Have fun with it!

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The Feeder Legacy

When the family secret is a history of being lunch…

I don’t have the best track record when it comes to jobs. Since finishing uni, I’ve been drifting from hospo to retail and back again, searching for something that will hold my interest and leaving a trail of irritated wanker bosses behind me.

When I once again find myself unemployed, my long-lost cousin steps in with a fantastic opportunity. Turns out, when my parents decided to walk away from the family, they left a generational business as well, and there’s a job waiting for me if I want it.

The catch? Vampires are real, and they’ll pay to drink my blood.

The Barale family sets the gold-star standard for vampire feeders, and the mere mention of my name gets me a job with a salary and benefits beyond my wildest dreams. In return, I need to move into a vampire’s house and offer him my wrist twice a day. Simple.

Except my new community—including my vampire, Tristan—doesn’t know that I’m clueless about their world, and it’s more complicated and dangerous than I thought. I’ve got to keep my head down and mouth shut while I learn the basics. How hard can it be?

After all, I’m a legacy.



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Chapter 1

I'm always late. It's one of those things my friends accept as inevitable. I'm tall, I have brown hair, and I'm chronically late.

Not usually this late, though.

Still, I'm not hurrying all that much when I finally make it to the restaurant, wave off the staff, and slide into the empty seat at the table filled with my friends. Maybe it makes me an arsehole, but they've been waiting for nearly forty-five minutes already. An extra two isn't going to hurt anyone.

"Sorry I'm late," I announce to the mix of scowling and resigned faces staring at me. "I had to stop by work to collect the stuff I'd left."

The scowling faces immediately turn resigned. "Why?" Catrina asks in that tone that says she knows the answer but is hoping it's not true. "Couldn't it have waited until your next shift?"

"Nope." I pick up the menu. "Got sacked."

A groan ripples around the table. Kade shakes his head. "What happened this time?"

I shrug. "The same thing as every other time. I can't fucking stand being told what to do by an underachieving wanker with a superiority complex. I think I'll have the Thai beef salad."

"Adam—"

"Nah." I hold up a hand to stop Kade in his tracks. "It's all good, mate. I know I'm the problem here. I'll find another job to pay the bills and keep working on finding the life path that's going to make me less of an arsehole to my workmates."

Tara snorts. “Not to kick a man when he’s down, but is that even possible?”

She’s got a point. Still, there has to be something out there that makes me happy.

Our server comes over with a look in her eye that says we’ve taken up the table without ordering more than drinks for long enough, and the next few minutes are a mess of questions about who wants to share what and does anyone care if the nachos have jalapeños on them before we’ve finally ordered and she leaves.

“Got any job ideas lined up, Adz?” Cat asks nosily. She’s actually my cousin, though we’d never met until we were at uni. She was dating Tara, who was in Kade’s and my Intro to Macroeconomics tutorial, and Cat joined us for drinks one day after we’d been working on a group project. I don’t remember exactly how it came out that we’re related—probably because we have the same surname—but I do remember how shocked I was. I didn’t even know my dad had a brother, much less that there were cousins and shit. When I mentioned meeting Cat to my parents during our weekly-ish phone call, I was told, “We don’t acknowledge those people, Adam. You’d be better off if you never spoke to that girl again.”

Too bad for them that I’ve never liked being told what to do. It’s ironic, because at the time I wasn’t even sure if I liked Cat. I probably wouldn’t have hung out with her anyway. I’m still not sure how much I like her, but somehow we’re both in this little weirdo friendship circle, even after she and Tara broke up. I’m not sure what my parents’ problem is with Dad’s family, but Cat’s a part of my life despite their wishes. And sometimes mine.

I make a face and shrug. “Not really, but something will come up. It’s not like I’m looking for a CEO job. Maybe I’ll go back to retail for a bit—I’m getting over hospitality.”

“But what—”

“Could we maybe take a break from talking about Adz’s endless parade of jobs?” Ladi interrupts. “Not to be selfish or anything, but some of us want to talk about our jobs, too.”

I flash him a grin. “Aww. Does the grad student want to whine about his mean supervisor?” I make a big show of settling into my seat and propping my chin in my hands. “I’m listening.”

He throws a napkin at me, laughing. We've been friends long enough that he knows how incredibly proud I am of him—and Kade, who just got his doctorate in economics a few months ago and is now officially a professor at Melbourne Uni. Because for some reason he thought going into academia was a good idea. Ladi's getting ready to defend his thesis soon, and even though we all know he's going to kill it, the stress is eating him from the inside out.

And yes, I'm the only underachieving slacker in the group. Tara's a lawyer, and Cat's an executive assistant to some billionaire entrepreneur who works from her mansion on acreage in Toorak—one of the perks of Cat's job is that she lives in this incredible pool house. Just thinking about how much it costs to own an acre of land in Toorak, one of Australia's most expensive suburbs, makes me dizzy.

"Tell us what happened," Tara says sympathetically to Ladi, and he launches into a story about another grad student and a fuckup in the lab they both work in that makes me incredibly glad I didn't decide to pursue academia.

But I need to pursue *something*. Almost all my jobs have been in retail and hospitality, with a couple of short stints in call centres. Those weren't successful, because it turns out people don't want to hear what customer support really thinks. They also don't want the salesperson who cold called them to tell them they're shitty people. In my defence, I was calling on behalf of a charity for seriously ill kids, so "charities are a scam" pissed me all the way off. I didn't expect to fall in love with any of the jobs I've had, but I was hoping that by now, something would have piqued my interest. I'm twenty-eight years old, for fuck's sake. How can I not know what I want to do with my life?

Worse, what the hell am I going to do to pay the bills? I told Cat I was going back to retail, but it's not that easy. The job market is tight right now, and at my age, employers always ask, "Where were you working before this?" Somehow, my work history and shoddy references always fail to impress.

In hindsight, that might be why I've only been able to get work with shitheads for the past few years.

Dinner with my friends soothes the restless part of me that's worried about paying the rent next month—not that my tiny bedroom in a share house with five other people and a single mould-riddled bathroom is all that

great—and as we work out how to split the bill, I impulsively suggest we do it again next week.

"I can't, unless it's Saturday." Ladi frowns. "I've got to redo all that fucking lab work."

Kade grimaces. "Saturday's the only night I *can't* do. The twins are playing against each other, and Dad's decided it should be a family thing, so I'm going to the game and then dinner after." Kade comes from a football family—his dad was on the Minotaurs during their powerhouse days in the early noughties, when they won four premierships back to back, and now he's head coach of the same team. The youngest kids—two brothers and a sister—have all gone into the AFL and AFLW and are already living up to the hype. Nobody's quite sure where Kade got his penchant for economics from.

Tara must see my disappointed face, because she says, "What if we do Saturday brunch?" I restrain myself from lunging across the table to kiss her.

Once the bill is paid and we've agreed on a time and place for brunch, we make our way outside and say our goodbyes.

"You coming with me?" Tara asks Cat. She lives in Burwood, so Cat's place is kind of on her way home. They usually travel into the city together, especially when Tara's driving, like she did today.

Surprisingly, Cat shakes her head. "I'm going with Adz. He's going to stay over with me tonight."

I… am? "Uh—"

Tara exchanges a look with Kade, and if Ladi wasn't busy scowling at his phone, I bet he would have got in on it too. It's no secret that Cat and I aren't exactly besties.

"Yep," my cousin insists, grabbing my arm and winding hers around it. "You don't have to go to work tomorrow, so you've got no excuse."

"Okay, but—"

"No. Excuse," she repeats, waving to the others and dragging me down the street toward the tram stop. "I might have an idea about a job for you."

That gets my attention. "Really? That'd be awesome. Wait, it's not dog walking, is it? Because I love dogs, but not so much with picking up their shit."

"It's not dog walking," she promises.

"Great. So… why couldn't we have let Tara drive us?"

She stops dead. “Fuck.”

We both turn back, but the others are long gone. “We could call her,” Cat suggests. “She probably hasn’t even got to where she parked yet.”

I consider it, then shrug. “Fuck it. It’s not cold. The tram won’t kill us, and this way you can tell me about this job on the way.”

It’s only another block to Swanston Street, and there aren’t many people waiting at the tram stop. Hopefully they’re there for another tram, and ours won’t be that full. I’m feeling lazy and want a seat.

It’s nearly ten on a weeknight, but the city is still alive, especially here in the hub of it. I can’t help smiling as I look around at the lit-up building facades, the people strolling along, and the still-open fast-food places that are perfect for before and after clubbing. The post-theatre crowds are starting to thin out as those people either go home or find somewhere for drinks and food. When I was little, we lived out near Hamilton, and while I loved growing up in the country, it didn’t take me long after we moved to Melbourne when I was ten to discover that I’m more of a city person. Plus, it’s easier to avoid my parents in a city of more than five million people than it would be in a small town.

The tram stops in front of us, and only one other person gets on with us. It’s half-empty, which means we have our pick of seats—looks like things are finally going my way!

It’s so sad that an empty seat on the tram is enough to make me happy. I really need to find some joy in my life.

“Tell me about this job,” I demand when we’ve both sat and the tram lurches into motion. We’ve got about twenty minutes until we get to Cat’s stop.

“It’s perfect for you,” she assures me, her gaze focused out the window. “Great pay, plus you’d be able to get out of that crappy house.”

I blink. “It pays that much? What would I be doing?”

“No—I mean, yeah, it pays enough that you’d be able to move, but it’s a live-in position, so you wouldn’t be spending your own money on housing.”

Some of my excitement trickles away. “Yeah, I don’t know. I think I’d rather have some separation from work.” What kind of job could it be? Housekeeper? Nanny? Gardener? Who the fuck needs a full-time live-in gardener in this day and age? It doesn’t matter—I know sweet fuck all about plants, and I’m not qualified to work with kids. That leaves

vacuuming floors and washing underwear, and since I barely do that for myself, the idea of doing it for someone else isn't a fun one.

"You'd have your own space," Cat assures me. "And plenty of free time. Like… way more than you have now."

That's… weird. I was thinking it could be a job like hers, though I doubt anyone would hire me to be an executive assistant—and if they did, they wouldn't keep me long—but free time? What kind of well-paying full-time job has free time?

Maybe this job isn't legal. Does knowing about illegal activity and doing nothing make me an accomplice? I'm pretty sure taking the job definitely would, but I'm running out of options.

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Chapter 2

"Here you go." Cat passes me a mug that does not contain the coffee I asked for. She made hot chocolate instead, claiming that it's too late for caffeine. Sometimes I wonder if we're really related. Maybe one of us was adopted? Or maybe the reason my parents don't have contact with the rest of the family is because of strongly opposing caffeine habits.

"Thanks," I say, trying not to sound as unenthusiastic as I feel. There's a time and a place for hot chocolate, and it's not when I want coffee. She's got a whole-ass fancy Nespresso machine on the bench, the kind with the attached milk frother and everything. What's the fucking point of having it if you're only going to drink coffee in daylight hours?

I'm more appreciative of the Iced VoVos she offers, though it does make me suspicious. Cat and I really aren't close. Inviting me home with her so she can tell me about this job makes sense, but giving me hot chocolate and bickies? That's totally sus. I'm definitely starting to think that this job is dodgy. Maybe her boss's title of "entrepreneur" actually means "underworld kingpin" and she needs someone to be a drug mule or something. She wouldn't say anything else on the tram, and I'm practically bursting with curiosity.

"So," she says at last, sitting down opposite me on the fucking amazing couch in her living room and curling her legs up underneath her. "You're probably wondering about the job I mentioned."

Really? What makes her think that? "Yeah, a bit."

"You'd basically be doing the same thing I do," she continues as though I haven't spoken. "There would be some minor differences, since you'd be

working for someone else. But the main job is the same."

I frown. That doesn't seem right. "Executive assistant? I don't have any experience working in an office. Like, at all. I doubt I could even get hired as a receptionist." If she's going to pull strings to get me a job, I'd like it to be one I at least have a chance of being good at. It's me, so it's likely I'll get sacked or walk out after six to nine months anyway, but it'd be good to make it through the trial period… or the first day.

Cat's gaze slides away from mine. "Yeah, about that. I'm not exactly an executive assistant."

Huh? I stare at her, but she's steadfastly looking anywhere but at me as she lifts her mug to her lips. If she's not an executive assistant, then what does she do that requires her to hang out at a mansion in Toorak, where she lives for free in— "Oh my god, are you a sex worker?"

She chokes on her hot chocolate, hurrying to put the mug down on the side table so she can hack up a lung. I move closer to thump her awkwardly on the back, then stop when she glares and bats my hand away.

"I'm not saying there's anything wrong with being a sex worker," I add when she finally seems to be breathing again. "I'm just surprised."

She wipes watery eyes with a tissue. "I am *not* a sex worker. For fuck's sake, Adam. Why did your brain even go there?"

"What? It's logical! You make a shit ton of money, work irregular hours from your boss's home, travel internationally with her, and live in her super cool pool house for free. If you're not her assistant, sex worker is the next guess." Is it weird that I'm a little disappointed she's not? Not because I want Cat to be a sex worker—or to think of her like that, ewww—but I reckon I could be a halfway decent rent boy if I put my mind to it. And I do like the idea of making a lot of money for doing something I like doing anyway.

Though… it's probably not the same when you're not doing it recreationally.

"I don't— You know what, let's just forget you said that. We're getting off topic." She sucks in a (slightly wheezy) breath. "I started telling this in the wrong place."

I look around the lounge room. "Really? Where should we go, then?"

"Not—" Cat sighs. "Not the physical place, Adz. I mean I started at the wrong part of the story."

I'd be embarrassed about my mistake, but it's nearly ten thirty on a weeknight, I've been up since five, worked almost a whole shift, lost my job, went for a 10K run, went back to work and exchanged insults with my ex-boss, met my friends for dinner, and I'm drinking hot chocolate instead of coffee. I've got no fucks to give for a tiny mistake like that.

"Why does this need a story? What the hell kind of job do you do?"

"You should already know all of it, but your parents didn't want to be part of it, so they never told you. Which sucks, because your life could have been a lot better if they weren't so up themselves."

I can't deny that my parents have very large sticks up their arses, but I really don't get what that has to do with anything. Also, her story is starting to sound a lot like those movies where the orphan (which I'm not) is sat down by an older mentor and told that they're the chosen one, and can I just say, *no fucking way.* I'm not a save-the-world kind of bloke. I'm a lie-on-the-couch-and-watch-a-movie-about-it bloke.

I don't say any of that, though, because it would probably make this whole thing take longer, and right now what I really want is to finish this conversation and fall asleep on Cat's couch, which is more comfortable than my shitty bed.

"For fifteen generations, our family has—"

My groan interrupts her, and her eyes narrow. "What?"

"Cat, come on. An old family tradition? Is this where you tell me that we're the guardians of an age-old curse or some shit like that?"

"No—"

I sit up straighter as a thought occurs to me. "Ooh, is it a trust? Please tell me the family has spent fifteen generations investing into a family trust that I'm now entitled to a part of." That would explain how she has money and lives here if she's not actually an executive assistant. It would also make me really fucking happy.

"Are you going to let me finish? Because I can just go to bed and you can find another crappy retail job."

"Vicious." I lift my mug in salute. "I'll be quiet."

She waits a few seconds, as though testing to see if I really can be quiet, and then continues. "It's not a trust. It's a job, but not a conventional one. Our family has been doing this for literally hundreds of years. Our bloodline is recognised for it."

I don’t say anything, but I’m sure my face shows what I’m thinking. Our *bloodline*? This is sounding more and more like “protect the Holy Grail” bullshit.

Still, if someone’s gonna pay me to keep an eye on a cup that nobody knows I have, I guess that would be okay. I make an encouraging noise.

Cat gives me a look that tells me she doesn’t believe my bullshit, but she keeps talking. “Basically, there’s a group of people who need special services—*not* sex—and one of them would hire you. Our family has proved over the centuries that we’re really suitable for it. It’s a live-in job for convenience, but most of the time you’d only be needed for about twenty minutes twice a day. The rest of your time is your own. In return, you’ll get living accommodation and full board, usually a housekeeper or at least a weekly cleaner, and a starting annual salary of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

It’s my turn to choke, but I’m not even drinking. I think I choked on air. Cat sits quietly and watches as I gasp and cough, and when I finally have air back in my lungs, I wheeze, “A quarter of a million dollars? Are you fucking with me?”

She shakes her head. “Nah.”

“You’re telling me that you make a quarter of a million dollars every year *and* you have no housing or meal expenses?” What do I need to do? Painful medical tests? Experimental torture? Sign me the fuck up.

“No,” she says, and disappointment hits hard. “That’s the starting wage. I’ve been doing this for six years, so I make almost double that.” She tucks her hair behind one ear and tilts her head so her earring catches the light. “See that stone? It’s a real diamond. Two carats, excellent quality. I bought them on a whim, and they cost more than your car.”

That’s not really a huge feat since my car is a pile of crap, but I get her point. She’s got money to burn, and the mould in my bathroom is very close to evolving into a sentient being.

“This sounds like a job I’m ideal for,” I declare. “Where do I apply? Will you vouch for me?”

“I’ll introduce you,” she corrects, “and your name will carry a lot of weight, but there’s no guarantee. My boss knows someone who’s currently looking, but he’s… discriminating. He’s hired two people already since February, and neither of them lasted more than a week.”

It’s only May. “So he’s a picky pain in the arse. That’s fine, I’m used to that. If I only need to put up with him for less than an hour every day, I can deal. I can be charming, polite, *silent*. He’ll love me.” I’ll change my whole personality if I have to.

Cat doesn’t look convinced. “We’ll see. Anyway, the first step is to get you registered and introduce you to my boss, who can put in a good word. Even if you don’t get hired by Tristan, someone will hire you. Our family has an impeccable reputation.” Her eyes narrow a bit, like she’s worried I might fuck up that reputation. Which… valid.

“No worries, sounds great. Register where? Do I need more ID than just my licence?” My passport is locked up at home, but I’ll go get it right now if I have to. Holy fuck—if I can work this job for even one year, it’ll have a huge impact on the rest of my life. I make a mental note to text one of my uni friends who works as a financial adviser. If I’m going to have cash to spare, I’m using it to set myself up for the future.

Wait…

“This is legal, right? I can deposit money into bank accounts and invest it and shit without any awkward questions?”

Cat rolls her eyes. “Yes, it’s legal, you idiot. No, you won’t need more than your licence. They will take a blood test, though.”

“A… blood test?” Maybe this is about weird medical tests after all. “Cat, I’m definitely in, ready to go right now, but what exactly is it I’ll need to do during those two twenty-minute shifts?”

She smiles. “Donate blood. Your employer will be a vampire.”

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Chapter 3

I LAUGH. That's what she's expecting, right? Why else would she have made that joke about working for a vampire?

Except Cat's not laughing along with me. She's just watching me, that smile still on her face, waiting for me to settle down.

Trepidation trickles through me. She wasn't *serious*, was she? Do I need to find a doctor for her? What does a psychotic break look like, anyway? Because a low-key belief in vampires doesn't seem like enough for me to worry, but if I have to, I will.

I clear my throat. "Seriously, Cat… what's the job?"

"The official title is feeder, which sounds pretty gross. Despite the shitty name, the job's important. They can't survive without us, which is why they treat us like we're precious gems."

Oh my god, she's serious. I lean over to put my mug on the coffee table, then take both her hands in mine. "Cat. Catrina."

She chuckles. "Yeah, Adam?"

"Are you seriously trying to tell me that vampires are real and you work for one as… as…" Fuck, what even is this? "As *lunch*?"

"Usually dinner and breakfast, actually, but sometimes a snack too, if she's had a busy day."

I can *feel* the sympathy taking over my face. "Babe, have you been getting enough sl— *Oh my god, what happened to your neck?*" I stare at the small patch of skin on her throat, where she's taken off the wide silver neck cuff she was wearing. Now I know why. There are two faint puncture marks surrounded by faded green and yellow bruises.

“It’s usually healed by now,” she’s saying casually, “but Nisha—well. It was a sunny day today and she needed extra, so the healing’s taking a little longer.”

I’m barely able to process that, I’m so busy staring at her neck. Either she’s genuinely had a psychotic break of some kind and is doing this to herself, she got kinky with a hookup, or she’s… telling the truth.

I swallow hard. “Vampires?”

Her sigh is equal parts exasperated and sympathetic. “This is all your parents’ fault. They didn’t want to be feeders, fine—free will is a thing, more power to them. But by cutting you off from the rest of us, they denied you the chance to learn about your culture.”

“My *culture*?” Okay, I’m leaning back toward psychotic break. Being snacked on by vampires is not a culture. The vampires themselves, sure, but…

I can’t believe I’m thinking about this so hard.

“Yes, your culture. I don’t think you understand what I’m telling you, Adz. The Barales are a gold-star feeder family. We’re the elite. Vampires compete for us, bid for us to choose them. We have a history of reliability, discretion, and consistency. There’s a reason vampires prefer to select their feeders from registered bloodlines over random humans, and we are the cream of the registered bloodlines.”

“And arrogant about it,” I mutter, squinting at her. She’s really serious about this. “Registered bloodlines?”

She nods. “Anyone with blood can be a feeder, but registered feeders are screened for disease, psychological suitability, and other things that could potentially cause problems for a vampire—massive debt, highly religious family, history of violence… that kind of thing. The Association of Registered Feeders is basically an agency to match feeders with vampires, and they love legacy feeders. They also act as a union of sorts for us, to ensure that our vampires aren’t reneging on employment conditions.”

A union for people who let vampires drink their blood. Sure, why not? I skip over that to my next question.

“Doesn’t it creep you out to let your boss chew on your neck? Like… what happened to workplace boundaries?”

The superior look she gives me makes me want to brace myself for whatever’s coming next. “It doesn’t have to be the neck. Usually it’s the

wrist—both vampires and feeders prefer that, because it's less… intimate." There's a whole lot of weight on that word, and I screw up my face.

"Ew, Cat, are you fucking your boss?"

She raises a brow. "Like you can talk. Didn't you lose a job for doing that? In a walk-in fridge?"

Heh. It was totally worth it, too. "Yeah, but I was risking minimum wage and the common cold, not…" I wave my hand around to encompass the pool house, her earrings, and everything else we've talked about tonight.

"Relax. We're not fucking. Being in a long-term feeding agreement leads to closeness sometimes. Nisha and I are friends, sort of, and we're comfortable with each other."

That's some fucked-up bullshit, but I'm not going to waste time arguing about it when I'm not even completely convinced that vampires are real. Maybe Nisha just has a fetish for gnawing on her employees, and Cat's making up weird stories to convince herself it's a good idea.

On the other hand, for a quarter of a million dollars a year, would that be such a bad thing? I've done stranger things in nightclub toilets with people I just met. Why not let an employer pretend they're sucking my blood?

"Tell me how it works," I demand. "We go to this registration place and sign me up, and then a vampire, what, picks my name off a list?"

"It won't be that way for you." She shakes her head. "I told you, one of Nisha's friends needs a feeder. We need to get you registered for your own benefit, but I think we should talk to Nisha in the morning, and I bet she'll set up a meeting with Tristan. It's better if we register you with a job offer waiting—the Association loves when that happens."

"I'll bet. But let's say this Tristan guy isn't interested. We go to the Association, and then…?"

Sighing as though I'm being stubborn instead of just wanting all the (maybe made-up) facts, she says, "New humans, ones who aren't legacies, fill out an application form and go through an extensive interview process with both humans and vampires, then background checks and psychological evaluations. It usually takes a few months, minimum, before they're either registered or turned away and memory wiped."

"Memory wiped!" She didn't mention that earlier.

“Of course. We can’t have people who might harbor a grudge knowing that vampires exist, Adam. What if they decide they want revenge? They could expose us.”

Sure, how dumb of me for not considering the angry people who wanted to be snacks. It would be terrible if they were walking around the city planning to tell the world that vampires exist—as if anyone would believe them.

“Okay, so rejected candidates get memory wiped and accepted ones get registered.” I’m still thinking about the psych evaluation part of the process. Are these people looking specifically for candidates who are susceptible to their scam?

But that doesn’t make sense—if the candidate didn’t already believe in vampires, they wouldn’t take the psych test to begin with, which would render the psych test a moot point in the case of a scam.

“That process applies to non-legacies,” Cat reminds me. “It’ll be different for you, even if Tristan’s not interested. Which he will be.” She smiles… proudly? This is getting weird.

Weirder.

“Different how?”

“They’ll welcome you with open arms, for starters. No interviews needed. The background check won’t be as detailed—just a confirmation that you’re not in massive debt that you can be blackmailed over. Stuff like that. A basic psych evaluation instead of an intensive one with a psychologist. A blood test to confirm that you’re healthy, instead of a full genetic breakdown. You should be registered within, like, two days max. Less if they’re not busy.”

“Because the family’s been doing this for a long time.” I always wondered why my parents cut us off from family, but now I can’t really blame them.

“Yeah. It’ll be even better for you, because both your parents are from generational feeder families.”

Ex-fucking-scuse me?

“Huh?”

Cat nods. “Your mum’s family, the Stewarts, go almost as far back as ours. Their rep is good too, but they’re not known for being delicious.”

“*What?*” My voice cracks on the shout, but it’s hard to care right now.

“Yeah. It’s one of the reasons vampires like us so much. Our blood tastes really good.”

“Oh my god,” I whisper, then follow it up with, “Do you have anything stronger than hot chocolate?”

My cousin laughs as though I’m being funny. “Relax, Adz. Nobody’s going to hold you down and drain every drop of blood from your veins. You still control who drinks from you, how much, and when.”

The blood draining thing hadn’t even occurred to me, but now it’s all I can think of. “Liquor, Catrina. Now. Where?”

She shrugs. “I don’t have any here. I don’t really drink anymore, since Nisha’s sober and can’t feed if I do. I don’t miss it, either.”

I’m momentarily sidetracked by the news that her boss—master? Overlady?—drinks blood but not alcohol. Is it a medical or cultural thing, or a simple choice? Fuck, is it a religious thing?

“Do vampires have religion? Like, is there a vampire god that they pray to about needing more humans to feed on?”

Cat looks at me like I’m crazy. “Don’t be stupid. Of course there isn’t a vampire god. Vampires were all born human. Some of them still believe in the religions they were raised with.”

My eye twitches. A religious zealot with an urge to drink human blood sounds like a disaster waiting to happen.

Finally, Cat seems to notice I’m freaked out. “You don’t have to do this,” she assures me. “I thought it would be a good choice for you because you only have to be polite for forty minutes a day, and the rest of the time you can be yourself. The pay’s good, the hours are good, and you can finally live somewhere there’s no chance of you getting infected with some new species of mould.”

“I don’t think mould’s an infection,” I mutter, though I don’t actually know. Maybe it is.

“But you don’t have to. You can crash here tonight and in the morning go home and start looking for another job. No hard feelings on my part, I swear.”

“Except then someone comes to find me to wipe my memories of this conversation.”

“Nah.” She flips a hand. “We’re legacies, Adam. That only happens to newbies. The Association knows that people like us grow up knowing vampires exist and can be trusted with it.”

There’s one flaw in that statement. “I didn’t.”

“Yeah, but it’s not like your parents planned an attack. Maybe they took it a bit far, completely cutting off their families and not letting you even know we existed, but they’re allowed to decide they don’t want to be feeders. People do it all the time. Hell, my sister’s not a feeder. She’s an engineer—I’ve told you that.”

“So… being a legacy doesn’t mean I have an obligation to be a feeder?”

Cat scoffs. “Fuck, no. This is just another type of family business, Adz. Is the family disappointed when one of the kids picks a different career? Sure. Do they still love them and feel proud of their achievements? Of course.”

I’m so confused. “Then why did my parents move nine hundred kilometres away and never speak to their family again?”

“No clue.” She shrugs. “You’d have to ask them.”

Yeah, nah.

“Listen,” Cat says, “you don’t have to decide anything right now. Let me get you a pillow and blanket. Get a good night’s sleep, and in the morning you can decide if you want to meet Nisha or not. No pressure. Even after you meet her, you can still go home and never think about this again.”

I snort, because the likelihood of that happening is nil. I could walk away, get another shitty job, move countries, join a circus… and the whole time, I’d be thinking about the fact that vampires exist.

“Thanks” is all I say. Cat’s trying to be nice. “Hey, wait. Shouldn’t we go talk to your boss now, while it’s dark?”

Cat stares blankly at me. “Why?”

I can’t believe I’m saying this, but, “Won’t she be, like, sleeping or whatever when the sun rises?”

Her cackle of laughter is the first sign that maybe my favourite horror movies got it wrong. “Vampires don’t need to sleep, Adz.”

“They don’t?”

“Nope. And before you ask, the sun doesn’t kill them, either. They do try to avoid it, though.” She gets up and disappears into the bedroom before I can ask why. That’s probably just as well. I’ve already got enough to think about—the rest of my questions can wait until tomorrow.

Cat comes back after a minute with a fat pillow and what looks like the softest blanket in existence. I reach out to touch it and prove my guess right.

“You can use the bathroom first,” she offers. “I’m going to load the dishwasher. Is it okay if I run it tonight? It’s super quiet.”

“Yeah, of course.” I’ve crashed here before and can attest to how quiet it is, but the fact is, once I’m asleep it would take a herd of elephants to wake me before I’m ready. It’s why I have five alarms set on my phone.

“Cat?”

She stops halfway to the kitchenette and turns to face me, mugs in her hands. “Yeah?”

“Does it hurt? I mean, when a vampire bites you, what does it feel like?”

A smile creeps across her face. “Fucking amazing.”

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Chapter 4

When I was a kid, my teachers used to tell us that we could be whatever we wanted to be. Doctors, lawyers, athletes. Stay-at-home parents, teachers, artists. If we focused in school, we could find ourselves doing things we never dreamed of.

I don't think they expected meeting a vampire to be one of those things.

Though, my grade four teacher, Mrs Davis, did have a way of looking at us when we misbehaved that gave the impression she wanted to suck the life out of us.

I probably shouldn't be thinking about life being sucked out right now, since I forgot to ask Cat if vampires can read minds. They can in some movies and TV shows, but not all.

"It's lovely to meet you, Adam," Nisha says with a polite nod. She has the same lilting Indian accent that Ladi's parents do, though not as heavy. "Cat speaks of you often."

"She does? I mean… that's nice. And it's nice to meet you too. Um… your house is epic. Love Cat's place." I give her two thumbs up, then shove my hands in my pockets, wishing I could take back the last twenty seconds. It doesn't help that Nisha's fucking gorgeous. Like, I don't even swing that way, but ten out of ten, way out of my league, would scrub the biohazard that is my shared bathroom if she was coming over just to impress her. She's almost as tall as me, curvy as fuck, with rich brown skin and black hair tumbling down her back in loose curls. She's wearing sharply tailored pants with a matching vest over a crisp white shirt, and the occasional flash

of fang plus her boss bitch energy is *hot*. I can totally see why Cat's okay with being Nisha's snack.

"Adam and I were talking last night," Cat says smoothly, covering up my awkwardness, "and he thinks he might be ready to register. It reminded me that you said Tristan had just let another feeder go…"

Nisha's face lights up. I mean like, *lights the fuck up*. You'd think Cat had just told her that she'd won a million dollars or something. The smile she turns on me is no longer just polite, it's warm. Welcoming. Dare I say enticing?

Yeah, probably not.

"That would be *perfect*," she declares. "He hasn't been able to tolerate anyone since Nadia retired, but then the Association's only had newbies to send him." She makes a tsking sound, as if to say newbies could never hope to… something. Fucked if I know what. I thought the whole job was basically holding out my arm and staying still. Can't see why newbies who'd been through the kind of assessment Cat was telling me about couldn't handle that.

"A legacy is exactly what he needs. Someone who understands the requirements of the role and the demands our society puts on him."

I shoot Cat an alarmed look, because that someone is not me. Does Nisha not know that I didn't grow up in the vampire world?

Cat's smiling and nodding, though, so clearly she thinks everything's going fine. And hey, I'm the one who woke up at five to go to my shitty ex-job, realised I could go back to sleep instead, wished I could do that every day for the rest of my life, and then remembered everything on offer with this job. I'd be fucking stupid to pass this up, and if that means I have to fake a few things, no worries.

"We can go over there this morning," Nisha's saying. "I'll call now. He had a temp out there yesterday, but he hates that and will probably wait as long as he can stand it before calling them in again."

A… temp. Like a temp feeder? That's a thing? I look at Cat again, and this time she's looking back, her expression promising to explain later.

Nisha checks her watch, then asks, "Have you had breakfast? You should eat while I make this call. You don't want to have low blood sugar." She chuckles like it's a joke, so I manage a *heh-heh* too, and then when she leaves the room, pulling out her phone, I whirl on Cat.

"What the fuck?"

“It’s fine,” she soothes, voice low. “I can give you a crash course on everything you need to know, and you’ll pick up the rest.”

She’s definitely overestimating how smart I am. “You never said anything about temps,” I hiss. “How does that even work?”

She waves it off. “Usually, they’re feeders who’ve retired from full-time service. My mum’s a temp. Whenever a vampire is between feeders, they can call the Association and arrange a meeting with a temp so they can feed. They’re feeders who haven’t worked a full ten years yet but don’t want to commit to a full-time live-in situation.”

This is way more complicated than I thought.

“Seriously, Adz, it’s all good. Come on, I’ll ask Tom to make us breakfast. What do you want? Toast, eggs?”

I follow her down a hallway and into the kitchen, where an older white guy is unloading a dishwasher.

“Hey, Tom,” Cat greets cheerfully, and he looks over and smiles.

“Good morning.” His gaze slides past her to me, and his smile becomes more professional. “I’m Tom Whaley, the housekeeper.”

“Adam Barale,” I introduce myself, trying not to be overwhelmed. Housekeepers are a real thing? I thought they only existed in history and on TV. “I’m Cat’s cousin.”

“Great to meet you.” He looks back at Cat and raises a brow. “Hungry?”

“If you don’t mind. Nisha’s calling Tristan, and then we’re going to take Adam over to meet him.” She puts heavy meaning in the last few words, and recognition lights Tom’s face.

“You need a proper breakfast, then. Do you prefer bacon or ham, Adam?” He puts down the glasses he was polishing and heads for the fridge.

I blink. “Uh… cereal’s fine. Or toast.” Most mornings I make do with instant coffee. I already helped myself to one of Cat’s fancy Nespresso pods, so if it wasn’t for everyone insisting I eat, I’d be set.

“Absolutely not,” Tom insists. “Make yourself comfortable, and I’ll have breakfast ready in a few minutes. Any allergies or dislikes I should know about?”

Is this real? “Um, not really. No tripe or anything like that, please.” Not that I think tripe is a breakfast food, but nothing I’ve experienced today has gone the way I thought it would, so who knows?

“Eggs Benedict and fresh fruit okay?” He’s already got his arms full of stuff, including a precariously balanced carton of eggs.

“That would be amazing,” I say honestly. Fancy breakfast food that I don’t have to pay for? “Can I help with anything? I’m not much of a cook, but I can follow directions.” Sometimes, anyway.

“Don’t even think about it. Sit, please. Would you like something to drink? Coffee or tea?”

I glance over at Cat, uncomfortable with the idea of this guy waiting on me. She’s already heading toward the giant monstrosity of a coffee machine on the bench. “I’ll get it,” she announces. “Do some eggs for me too, please?”

“Of course!” Tom beams.

I sit quietly and organise my thoughts while Cat plays with the machine and Tom cracks eggs into a saucepan of water, and when my cousin finally puts a cappuccino in front of me, I have a mental list of questions to ask her.

“Is this Tristan guy going to suck my blood this morning?”

She and Tom both look at me. “They prefer to call it feeding, Adz,” Cat scolds. “Be respectful.”

I grit my teeth. “Sorry, I’m still learning the lingo. So, this morning…?”

She shrugs. “Maybe, but probably not. Tristan’s kind of fussy about stuff like that—he’ll want the contract signed and everything settled before he feeds from you.”

Contract. That makes it seem like a proper job. Which, from what Cat said, it is, but the idea of contracts being in place is like an official seal. “Do I need to get a solicitor?”

“What for?” She sips her coffee, watching me over the rim.

“To read the contract. I’m not a legal expert.” And I don’t love the idea of being locked into an eternity of servitude to a vampire who can pass me around to his friends. There’s gotta be a line, and that’s mine. Which means I need someone to check the fine print.

“That’s what the Association’s for. It’ll probably be a standard Association contract for this first one, anyway. If things work out, the next one will be negotiable for both of you.”

Cat has a lot of faith in the Association, but I make a mental note to read every word of the contract and call Tara if anything feels even a bit off. She doesn’t specialise in contract law, but I know she did a couple of semesters of it at uni.

Time to move on. “I wanna make it really clear that I’m grateful to Tom for what smells like it’s going to be a cracker of a brekky, but also, why is Tom making us breakfast?”

Cat sighs, and it’s Tom who answers. “That’s my job. I look after the house and Nisha, and that means I look after Cat too. Nisha can’t feed if Cat’s not eating properly.” He frowns. “How come you don’t know this?”

“My parents are freaks and this is my first time,” I say dismissively. “I’m not clear on some of the day-to-day points.”

That seems to satisfy him, enough to bring me a plate of food that looks as good as it smells. Buttered sourdough toast topped with perfectly cooked bacon and poached eggs, with exactly the right amount of hollandaise sauce spooned over. My mouth is watering as I pick up my knife and fork, and I take the first amazing bite as he puts down a bowl of mixed berries and sliced mango.

“Thank you.” The words are garbled because my mouth is full, but he grins.

“You’re welcome.”

I was already sold on this job, what with the incredible salary, living conditions, and flexible work hours, but now that I know it comes with someone who’ll clean up after me and cook me delicious meals, I am *sold*. Like, sign me up. Wanna taste my blood now? Whatever floats your boat. I can’t believe my parents tried to deny me this life.

Nisha comes in as I’m finishing my second egg and eyeing the fruit. It’s not berry or mango season, so it’s probably going to be tasteless, but on the other hand, this house has so far produced fancy coffee and a café-style breakfast on demand, so out-of-season delicious fruit might be possible also.

“Oh good, you’ve fed him,” Nisha says. I pause midway through sliding a blueberry between my lips. That sounds a lot like I’m a pet of some kind.

The berry touches my tongue, sweet and bursting with flavour, and I decide I don’t care if Nisha wants to scratch behind my ears and tell me to stay.

“I spoke to Pierce, and we have an appointment to see Tristan at ten.” She eyes me. “Does he have something else to wear, Cat?”

I swallow a strawberry. “I can hear you. And no. I wasn’t expecting to stay here last night.”

“It wouldn’t matter if he did,” Cat adds. “All his clothes are like that or worse.”

“Hey!”

“That’s unacceptable,” Nisha declares before I can launch into a speech defending my perfectly good clothes. “Tom, do we have enough time for you to do something about this?” She gestures toward me, and the goodwill I was feeling for her is rapidly draining away.

Tom glances at the clock on the oven. “Probably not, but I may have a solution. My nephew leaves some clothing here for when he visits. He and Adam are close to the same size. There might be something suitable.”

“Yeah, I don’t think I wanna wear another dude’s clothes.”

“Please check,” Nisha says. “I’d appreciate it.” It’s almost as if I’m not here. Which is weird since they’re talking about me.

I grab a piece of mango and remind myself that it’ll all be worth it.

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Chapter 5

Tom's nephew's clothes fit me pretty well, but they're a lot more preppy than anything I'd wear, so I'm still not all that comfortable. As soon as this Tristan guy hires me, I'm going home to change. If he expects me to dress like this for work, he's gonna be disappointed.

He wouldn't expect me to dress like this, would he? It's not like my preference for trackies and T-shirts is going to impact my ability to hold out my arm and let him suck on it.

God, that sounds so fucking weird.

Honestly, a big part of me is still convinced this is some kind of complicated practical joke. Maybe for TV? I don't think Cat ever said what kind of entrepreneur Nisha is—maybe she's developing a new show and I get to be in the pilot episode. The fangs could be part of a costume. Though, if that's true, whoever the makeup artist is should be nominated for all the awards, because there's something about Nisha that makes it all too easy for me to believe she's not human.

Which is why my stomach is doing some fancy acrobatics as I sit in the back seat of Nisha's pimped-out Range Rover with windows tinted so dark, the interior feels like twilight. Cat's driving, and Nisha's sitting beside her in the passenger seat, simultaneously tapping away on her phone and talking to my cousin in a low voice about "the Greer project," whatever that is. Cat said she's not Nisha's actual executive assistant, but based on this fifteen-minute drive, Nisha clearly respects her opinions on business. Good for Cat.

I’m not sure where I was expecting this Tristan guy to live, but I’m totally not surprised when Cat slows the car on a side street in Canterbury. My high school girlfriend’s dad was a real estate agent, and during one of his incredibly boring lectures about the importance of getting into the property market, he went on a tangent about the most expensive suburbs in Melbourne, and Canterbury was right near the top of the list. It sometimes gets forgotten about because it’s not as trendy as Toorak or Armadale and doesn’t have the beach like Brighton.

Am I really thinking about suburban property values right now?

Cat turns into a driveway and stops in front of a gate. This is a weird place to park, but I unbuckle my seat belt and reach for the—

“Hello, Pierce,” Nisha says, phone to her ear. “We’re at the gate.”

Oh. I subside into my seat and a moment later watch as the gate begins to swing open. It’s not super fancy, just cream-painted pickets, but it’s taller than a standard picket gate. I don’t think I’d be able to see over the top of it if I was standing in front of it—not without getting on my tiptoes, anyway.

I let my gaze slide down the rest of the house frontage. The driveway is on the far-right side of the block, and to my surprise there’s a matching driveway and gate on the far left. I guess the frontage is double the width of a standard suburban block, but still—what does anyone need two driveways for? Between them is a standard-height picket fence in the same cream colour as the gates, but the dense seven-foot hedge behind it hides the house from view. It’s a nice hedge, though, with dark green leaves and those big pink flowers. My mum has a couple of bushes like that in the front yard of their house. She likes them because they’re evergreen and bloom a few times a year. Dad hates them because when their petals drop, they make a huge fucking mess.

I really need to call my parents. We have a lot to talk about.

The gate’s fully open now, and Cat accelerates smoothly between the posts and up the driveway. I look around curiously, my face practically mashed against the window. This might end up being my home.

The driveway isn’t long, but it curves in an arch shape from one gate to the other, the apex of the arch skimming the base of the steps leading up to the front veranda of the house. The house itself is a red-brick Federation style, complete with half turrets and lead-glass windows. It sprawls across the block while also somehow giving the impression of being small and

neat, and I just know it's chock-full of original architectural features. As long as there's Wi-Fi and decent hot water, I don't care.

Cat pulls the car to a stop in front of the steps, and I'm grateful that I chose to sit on the passenger side of the car, because it gives me an extra few seconds to look around as I get out of the car. The front yard is unmistakably a "garden." There are three big old trees scattered across it, each with its own round hedge-bordered flowerbed around the base. One is casting full shade over the front of the house. Is that deliberate? Cat said vampires avoid sunlight—maybe they like to plant big, shady trees so they can still spend time outdoors. The lawn between the flowerbeds is lush and green in a way that speaks to more maintenance than the occasional mow, and as I look in the direction of the street, that big green privacy hedge helps to build the fantasy that there's nobody else for miles.

As I round the back of the car, I see that the lawn and garden continue down the side of the house in a wide swath—wide enough to fit a three-car garage, if someone wanted to. There's probably already a garage somewhere here, right? There would have to be on a property this size, in this area. Maybe it's on the other side of the house? Or behind it—a lot of houses in these older areas have rear access.

I approach the steps, my eyes locking onto the man coming out through the front door. He looks different from what I expected. Based on how Cat and Nisha talked about him, plus this very traditional house, I thought he'd be older and super conservative-looking. This guy looks like he's just a few years older than me, mid-thirties tops, and his suit and haircut are super trendy. If someone asked me to match him to a house, I'd pick a modern concrete-and-steel townhouse, or an apartment in a high-rise.

He comes down the steps, smiling at Nisha as he says hello. "It's always a pleasure to see you, and especially so if you can help with this problem," he adds, leaning in to… not kiss her cheek. I frown as I stop beside Cat. What are they doing? It's not even an air kiss, though it kind of looks like one—it has the same lack of contact. In fact, there's a good ten or fifteen centimetres between them. His face is turned away from Nisha, and then when they swap sides, hers is turned away from him. I nudge Cat, prepared to whisper my question, but the death glare she shoots me changes my mind. It can wait.

He steps back, his attention on Nisha only. Is he ignoring us? That's fucking rude. I might be here so he can suck my blood, but I won't be

treated like some kind of second-class—

“I don’t believe you’ve ever met my feeder,” Nisha says, turning gracefully toward us, and as though she’s given permission, he finally looks in our direction. “This is Catrina Barale.” There’s no mistaking the boastful way Nisha announces it, like Cat’s someone special, and I wonder again if there’s something going on between them. If there isn’t, does that mean Nisha’s boasting about Cat’s bloodline? Or maybe her actual blood? Like, what’s the rule in this situation? Cat said vampires get excited by the taste of our family’s blood, but does that also mean there’s status involved in having one of us work for them? Is it just bloodline that infers status, or are there other things too, like, I dunno… education? Looks? Independent wealth?

There are so many questions I want to ask right now.

Tristan smiles at Cat, still not looking at me, but I catch the flash of fang nonetheless. Do these guys never fully smile in public, or are they just better at hiding it when they’re around people who aren’t in the know?

“Cat,” Nisha continues, “I’d like you to meet Pierce Medwin, Tristan’s right hand.”

Ohhh. That makes more sense. Though for some reason I thought all vampires were super powerful and wealthy. I didn’t expect to find one working as an assistant.

Pierce inclines his head in a way that looks like a bow and should also make him look like a pretentious wanker but somehow doesn’t. Must be because he’s a vampire. “It’s a pleasure, Ms Barale.”

“The pleasure’s mine,” Cat says in an elegant, almost formal voice, also inclining her head. She never talks to me that way. “Please call me Cat. Nisha speaks so well of you.”

Did someone body snatch my cousin? Who the fuck says “speaks so well of you” in real life? If I’m going to need to talk to people that way, we’re all shit outta luck. I don’t even think I could get the words out without laughing.

Fuck. Nisha’s going to introduce me next. What the hell am I supposed to say?

“And this is Cat’s cousin, Adam Barale. He’s been playing with human work but is now ready to join the family legacy.”

Playing? I’m going to let that go this one time because Nisha has fangs, but I can see I’m going to need to set some boundaries about respect.

I step forward and offer Pierce my hand. “Hey, mate. Great to meet ya.”

He blinks down at my hand, then glances at Nisha, who has a similarly flummoxed expression on her face. I might have fucked up. Do vampires not shake hands?

“Adz,” Cat hisses, but I’m already talking again.

“Whoops, sorry.” I drop my hand. “Habit from working with, uh, humans. Hope I didn’t offend.”

Relieved smiles cross both their faces, and Pierce chuckles. “No offence taken. You’re among friends here.” He hesitates. “If I could make a suggestion…?”

I nod. “For sure.” I didn’t notice before, but he’s got an accent. It’s only noticeable on some words, like he’s been here a long time. I’m not sure exactly what it is—it sounds some kind of British, but I’ve met enough tourists working in hospitality to know that British and American accents abound in several countries where English is a second language.

“Be careful not to let old habits slip in when you’re speaking to Tristan. He’s not fond of… That is, he doesn’t like to be… casual.”

Oh, great. This is going to be a disaster.

I muster up a smile and nod. “Sure. Of course.” I can fake being up myself for long enough to get this job. After that… well, I’ll have to hope the taste of my Barale blood is so good that he decides he can handle me being *casual*. Because I don’t think a total personality change is likely.

Pierce and Nisha walk up the steps and head for the door, and as Cat and I fall in behind them, I elbow her hard. “What the fuck, Cat?” I hiss. “You don’t wanna maybe give me a heads-up nomphhh!”

Her hand over my mouth prevents me finishing my tirade, and she drags me to a halt on the veranda, her gaze darting toward the doorway the vampires went through. After a moment, she turns to me, leans in, and whispers directly into my ear, “Vampires have excellent hearing.”

What?

She pulls back to look me dead in the eye, brows raised, and suddenly I get it. Even with my voice low, their hearing is good enough for them to have overheard me, and she *really* doesn’t want them to know that I know bugger all about vampires, feeders, and the etiquette of them meeting each other.

A trickle of fear makes itself known in my gut.

“Cat,” I whisper, and she shakes her head.

“No touching,” she whispers back almost inaudibly. “Not until Tristan offers you a contract. Nod your head instead of shaking hands.”

I can do that. “Okay.”

“Try not to say too much, unless he asks a direct question. This is going to be fine, Adz. We’ll talk later, and I’ll fill you in.”

“But—”

“Is something wrong?” Pierce’s voice is shockingly loud after our whispered conversation, and both our heads whip around. He’s standing in the doorway, a concerned frown creasing his brow. At least he doesn’t look angry.

“Not at all,” Cat assures him with a smile. “Adam’s never met anyone of Tristan’s stature before.” The implication that I want to make a good impression is clear without her actually saying the words, and I wonder if every conversation with a vampire needs to be so carefully thought out. Do they always talk in circles?

“You’ll be fine,” Pierce says, standing back as we approach and then turning to lead the way. “After all, you’re a Barale.”

Right.

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Chapter 6

The house I currently live in was built at about the same time as this one. It would have originally had similar architectural features, too. The difference is that the house I live in has been a rental share house for more years than I've been alive, and over time, those features have been damaged and replaced by whatever material was cheapest. The floors that weren't covered by crappy carpet are scuffed and gouged, the plaster is water stained, and the last of the original windows is so rotted that even the property manager made a face about it during our last inspection. The rest were replaced long ago.

This house is the opposite. From the outside, it was obvious that money and effort have been put into the upkeep—original leadlight windows!—and from the second I step across the threshold, that's confirmed. The wood floors gleam, as does the banister of the staircase ahead of me. The fancy plasterwork on the ceiling is not only intact but also cobweb free, and instead of a bare bulb, light is provided by an elegant chandelier. Plus, the whole place smells good—not a hint of mould or dusty stale air. Just lemon cleaner and… fresh bread? Man, I hope that's fresh bread, and that it's been baked by a ripper of a housekeeper who's going to take joy in feeding me all my favourite foods.

I briefly wonder if I should take my shoes off. I wouldn't at home, but then at home there's every chance that the floor will have some sort of unidentified sticky substance on it. I don't think we even own a mop. The floor here looks sock friendly, and I wouldn't want to dirty or damage it.

Before I can decide—or ask—I'm ushered through a pair of open double doors to my right. I'm guessing this used to be a formal lounge room, because as I step in, I see another set of double doors on the left, connecting through to what's unmistakably a dining room with a massive table. I only spare it a glance before my attention locks on the big, solid desk in the middle of the room—and the man standing beside it, speaking to Nisha in a low voice.

Is this Tristan? For some reason, I'm a bit surprised by him, even though he fits the vibe of this house pretty well. Actually, I think he'd fit even better in some drafty old castle, wearing a velvet smoking jacket and moping in the library with a glass of brandy. Even without seeing his fangs, he looks like a vampire—or what the gothic ideal of a vampire is. Maybe a bit shorter. I'd guess he's a few inches shorter than me, so about five nine or ten. He's not big—lithe is probably the best description, though it's hard to tell with that three-piece suit. Who wears a three-piece suit if they're not a groomsman at a wedding? He's even got a tie pin and pocket square.

His hair is coal black and curly, but every curl has been ruthlessly styled in a way that tells me he'd never let it just tumble loose over his forehead. Shame, because it would look phenomenal against that milk-white skin. This is a bloke who avoids the sun at all costs, he's that pale. Even without the vampire thing to consider, he'd burn faster than a paper factory in the Aussie sun.

But all that pale skin just makes his full lips look even redder. Is he wearing makeup? His mouth isn't shiny, so not lip gloss, but there are a million types of lipstick or lip balm or lip stain. I've both lived with and dated enough people who use them to know that. Nobody's lips are naturally that red and plump and biteable….

Whoa. That's not a direction I expected my thoughts to take this morning. I glance over at Cat, but she's talking to Pierce about our plans to go to the Association after this so I can register. I return my gaze to Tristan.

Pierce was right when he said Tristan doesn't like casual—it's ten on a Wednesday morning, the guy's working from his home office, and he's dressed like he's about to have a formal meeting with royalty. Maybe he's got an important meeting after this? What does he even do, anyway? Nisha is actually an entrepreneur like Cat always said, but if Tristan is also, there's no evidence of that in this room. The desk doesn't have any electronics on it—not even a tablet or phone.

Suddenly alarmed, I glance around for any sign of a wireless router. If there isn't high-speed internet here, I'm going to need to make it a condition of employment. I can't live without my Xbox and streaming services.

Frighteningly, I see no little box, no cables, no delightful blinking lights. Just the big rug, the desk, and a seating arrangement by the windows with a pair of chairs and an upholstered bench in the half turret. There's real artwork on the walls, but no sign of the magic that's broadband internet. Maybe it's in another room? Sure, the office or study or whatever this is would be the obvious choice, but if the Wi-Fi signal is strong, it can be anywhere.

"Adam?"

I blink and lift my head to look at Nisha, who's frowning at me in a "you're embarrassing me" way. "Yes. Sorry, I was thinking." That doesn't seem to make her or Cat any happier, so I add, "This is a great room. I like the… view." The windows look out over parts of the front and side gardens, so it's not even a lie.

Cat and Nisha relax a bit but not completely, and Pierce flashes a tiny smile. Tristan, on the other hand, looks… bland. Expressionless. His eyes flick over me—and wow, how did I not notice his eyes before? I assumed they'd be brown, but they're actually hazel, a bright golden-green-blue blend that somehow cuts right through me. The thick black lashes surrounding them make them seem even lighter. It's eerie.

And worryingly hot. He's not my usual type—too buttoned up, plus, *vampire*—so it's concerning that I find him this attractive. Like I told Cat, it was one thing to fuck my boss when I was only risking a minimum-wage hospitality job, of which this city has thousands, but it's another thing entirely when a quarter of a million dollars *per year* is on the line.

"He'll do."

It takes a moment for the words to sink in, maybe because Tristan is turning away as he says them, clearly dismissing me as though he has more important things to do. I'm a pretty easy-going guy, and it takes a lot to get my back up, but being treated like I don't matter is a surefire way to do it. There's definitely no chance of me fucking the boss now.

He'll be lucky if I don't ingest a toxic substance in an attempt to poison him.

Though that would kill me too, so maybe I need to think through the potential pitfalls before I take drastic action.

“Wonderful,” Nisha is saying. “We’ll—”

“Great to meet you,” I interrupt, my voice clear and loud. “Tristan, is it? I’m Adam Barale.”

Tristan stiffens slightly, but everyone else full-on *freezes*. The horror on Cat’s face tells me I just fucked up again, but seriously, how? It’s not like I actually called him on being a rude prick. I just introduced myself.

Okay, yeah, it was passive aggressive, but still.

The great vampire snob Tristan turns to face me, still just as expressionless as before. “Adam *Barale*, you said?” The slight emphasis on my surname, like he doubts I could belong to such a superior feeder family, doesn’t escape me. Neither does the faint British accent, or the warm, melodiously deep voice.

“Yes. And my mother is a Stewart.” I smirk, glad that Cat threw in that little bit of trivia about Mum’s family also being generational feeders.

Dark brows lift slightly. “Quite an illustrious heritage.” Left unasked but heavily implied is how two prominent families produced me.

I fucking hate this guy.

So I plaster on my sunniest smile. I’m going to milk him for every cent and benefit I can get. “Oh yeah, for sure. Hey, is there Wi-Fi here? Because I play Fortnite with some friends every Thursday night, so I gotta be able to get online.”

Someone sucks in a breath—probably Cat. Do vampires even need to breathe?—but I don’t take my eyes off Tristan. He’s still studying me with that bland expression, and then I swear the corners of his mouth curve up. It’s over too soon to be called a smile, but at least it’s proof he’s not a robot.

“There is Wi-Fi,” he confirms. “Pierce will give you the password when he shows you your rooms. A moving company will attend your home this afternoon to assist you with bringing your things here. I understand you’re going to the Association once you leave here?”

A moving company? I don’t have that much stuff—it’ll all fit in my shitbox car. “Yes,” I say instead. If he wants to pay for fancy movers, I won’t argue.

“I’ll ensure they have your contract for review by the time you get there.”

I try to work out where the trap is in that sentence. Cat said the contract would likely be a standard one, so why would anyone need to review it? But on the other hand, if he’s planning to put anything dodgy in there, why

would he send it to the feeder union to be reviewed? This guy is either super sneaky in a way I can't work out, or he's completely aboveboard. I wish I knew which it was.

In the meantime… "Thank you."

He nods once. "Clive runs the house and will see to your needs. He's been a member of my household for a long time and answers only to me." There's a warning there, but I don't plan to be a dick to the person who's going to cook for me, so I smile and nod.

"No problem. I just want to do my job, not interfere with his."

"You are, of course, free to use your time as you wish, but I frequently hold meetings here and require noise to be kept to a minimum."

I shrug. "I have headphones." They're shitty Kmart ones, but once I get my first pay, I can splurge on something good.

"There will be a car and driver at your disposal—"

"Nah, thanks, but I've got a car," I assure him. "Don't worry, I don't need a garage space. Will I need a council permit to park on the street?"

Finally, he seems taken aback. It's not obvious from his face, but he pauses for a second before answering. "There's off-street space available for you to park. However, I would prefer that you not go out alone. Anna can take you anywhere you need to go."

Huh? "Uh, yeah… what? Why can't I go out alone?"

"I will rely on you to feed," he reminds me, like that's something I could forget. "It would be a simple thing for someone to strike out at me through you."

My jaw drops open, wide enough that a whole colony of flies could fly in. Either Tristan's really up himself or he's a VIP, and I don't have a fucking clue which it is.

"Yeah, right," I manage. "Sorry, forgot that. I've been working with humans for a while. Uh… I'm sure"—fuck, what name did he say?—"Anne and I can work something out."

"Anna," he corrects, and I nod.

"Right, Anna. I'll be honest, there's probably gonna be times I go out alone, but we can come up with a system so you don't have to worry about people using me against you. Maybe you can track my phone." Ugh. Not my favourite plan.

He studies me for a few seconds, then says, "We can discuss options when Anna is present. She's a trained security officer."

Holy fuck, who is this guy?

"I prefer to feed here in the office at six o'clock," he continues. "Both morning and evening."

I wince. "Six a.m., really? Is it okay if I'm still in my pj's?"

Cat doesn't make a sound, but I can *feel* her rage directed at me. As soon as we're alone, she's going to let me have it. That's fine—I'm not too happy with her right now either.

That not-quite-smile tugs at Tristan's mouth again. "Yes."

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Chapter 7

We leave Nisha with Tristan, and Pierce takes me and Cat on a tour of the house. I'm still not completely sure what the fuck happened in that office. Tristan was being a dick—*he'll do*—and I felt the need to assert myself, but somehow that ended with me talking about my pj's? It was the weirdest job interview I've ever had, and that includes the time I walked into a café to ask if they were hiring and got handed an apron and told to take table two's order. But at least they asked if I had restaurant experience first, *and* I wasn't going to be living in their home.

Tristan literally knows nothing about me except that I'm a member of the Barale family—and the Stewarts, I guess. Nisha vouching for me must carry a lot of weight, so I better not fuck this up, or Cat will kill me.

That's another weird thing. Cat and I won't ever be that close—we're just different people—and until eight years ago, I didn't even know she existed, but I don't want to lose her from my life. I'm not really sure how to handle these feelings.

As we leave the office, I take a second to look around the entry hall more thoroughly. To the left is the front door, to the right, a staircase leading upstairs, with the downstairs hallway continuing past it. There's another hallway directly across from us, also.

Pierce turns toward the stairs. "We can start with your rooms," he suggests. "Then do the rest of the downstairs and introduce you to Clive and Anna."

"Sounds good," I agree as Cat and I follow him. Despite the age of the house, the stairs don't creak at all, and I mention it.

Pierce chuckles. “Clive would die before he let anything creak in this house.”

“But it’s an old house,” Cat protests. “Creaks are normal.”

“Not on Clive’s watch. He had something done to the stair treads a couple of years ago. They’re still original, but they were pulled up and reinforced or something like that. If you notice anything even minorly inconveniencing, like a slow drain or a squeaky window, let him know and he’ll take care of it.”

“What if I don’t care?” A slow drain is nothing as long as it’s still actually draining.

He pulls a face that makes him look more human and less vampire. “Learn to care, Mr Barale. If Clive finds out you knew and didn’t tell him, you’ll wish you had.”

Uh… “You can call me Adam,” is all I can think of to say as we reach the top of the stairs. Because seriously, what?

“Thank you. And of course, you’ll call me Pierce. I’m here quite often, so we’ll likely cross paths. I’ll make sure you have my number, just in case there’s anything you need my help with.”

Like what? “Thanks.” I want to ask what exactly his job is, in the hopes that it’ll give me a clue what Tristan does, but I make the mistake of looking around and every thought flees my head.

“It’s an apartment,” Cat exclaims. “This is huge.”

“Not technically an apartment, since there isn’t a separate entry—and no door to close it off from the rest of the house,” Pierce says apologetically. “But you’re the only one up here, so nobody else will even use the stairs. Except Clive when he comes up to clean and stock your fridge.”

My fridge. My gaze homes in on it unerringly. It’s not big—barely more than a bar fridge, really—but since I don’t plan to be cooking all that much, it’s fine. Perfect for snacks and drinks. Though I could cook if I wanted, because my new place has a kitchenette, complete with microwave, two-burner stove, sink, and a small dishwasher.

The kitchenette flows into a dining area with a six-seater table, and then a lounge room with a big, squashy modular couch that looks perfect for falling asleep on while watching TV. Speaking of the TV, it’s fucking huge—at least eighty inches. The room’s big enough that I won’t go blind

watching it, and I might already be in love. It's the open-plan home of my dreams.

"If you'd prefer to use your own furniture, we can move things out. There's storage over the garage for anything that doesn't fit in here or isn't needed right now," Pierce assures me, and I nod calmly, like I'm not inwardly planning a Marvel movie marathon. Imagine what the destruction of New York City will look like on a TV that big!

"I've only got my bed and the Xbox," I say. "If the bed here is good, I might not even bother bringing mine." I make it sound like I'll need to consider it even though I already know the bed here is a million times better than mine. It would have to be, since mine was ancient when I got it and has a ravine running down the middle.

"Of course, or we can put yours in storage instead," Pierce says. "The bedroom is this way."

I wait for his back to be turned before catching Cat's eye. She mouths, "I told you so," while I pump my fist in silent victory. Then we follow Pierce around a corner to what looks like a study area, with a big desk, a half-height bookshelf, and a metal storage cabinet.

"Nadia used this as her craft area," Pierce is saying, "but it would work just as well as an office or library. The feeder before her had gym equipment here."

"Gym equipment?" That could be convenient. I don't go as much as I used to because I've been working a lot, but I wouldn't mind getting back into it. If the equipment was right here, I'd have no excuse not to use it—plus, it would be easier than making this Anna person drive me and pick me up.

"It may still be in storage, but if not, we can arrange to have some delivered. I'll ask Clive."

"If it's in storage, yeah, that'd be cool, but don't go buying anything. I can probably make do with a couple of free weights to start." I wonder if me going for a run would be a safety issue for Tristan. Something to ask when I meet Anna.

We walk through the little nook, and I notice yet another big leadlight window looking over the gardens. The main room had several also, flooding the space with light.

Unlike the rest of the open-plan flat, the bedroom has a door. Pierce pushes it open and precedes us inside. It's a great size, big enough to hold

the king-sized bed, two bedside tables, and an armchair, with space to easily move around. There are two open doors along the right-hand wall, and I spy a bathroom through one and a chest of drawers and hanging rails through the other. Walk-in robe? I'm really coming up in the world!

I stroll over to the bed and sit on the edge of the mattress, giving a gentle bounce. "This is fine. I'll see if any of my housemates want to keep my bed."

Pierce nods. "Excellent. We'll tell Clive now so he can make it up."

"Oh, I can—" A foot—Cat's—stomping on my toes stops me. I cough to cover my gasp of pain. "Sure, that sounds fine."

Pierce is no dummy, and he definitely noticed our little byplay. "If I can offer some advice, Adam?"

"God, yes. I never turn down free advice." I stand and wander toward the window. In this room it looks over the backyard, which I haven't seen yet. It looks like there's a nice little paved patio with a table and a couple of deck chairs.

"Clive has been looking after Tristan's home for decades. Easily longer than you've been alive. He has his own habits and preferred ways of doing things, and Tristan is very fond of him. We both know that a feeder has special value and often can claim special favours"—I did *not* know that—"but I would advise you not to upset Clive."

I don't know why people keep implying that I'm going to piss off the guy who'll cook for me. Do they think I'm stupid? I might not be a Mensa candidate, but even I know not to bite the hand that feeds me.

"I've got no intention of upsetting Clive," I promise. "I'm happy to follow his lead with how he runs the house." He's been here decades? He's probably a grandfatherly type, set in his ways, but who loves looking after people and spoiling them. I can't wait—I grew up without grandparents, obviously, and I used to get so jealous of my friends when they talked about the stuff they did with their nanna and pops.

Pierce seems satisfied with my assurances and leads us back down the stairs. "You've seen Tristan's office, but that door next to it is the formal dining room. He uses it for meetings and dinner engagements. You'll likely need to be in attendance at some point. Do you have suitable clothes?"

I blink at him. "For dinner?"

He nods. "Yes. The dinners are always formal affairs. Black tie at least." He pauses. "I doubt there will be a white tie dinner anytime soon, but you

should be prepared for that too."

I shoot Cat an alarmed look. I'm not even sure what black tie means, unless it's referring to a literal black tie.

"How nice!" my cousin says. "We can go shopping."

Pierce frowns. "I'll tell Clive to arrange something. Tristan has accounts with several establishments."

Oh my god, what the fuck have I gotten myself into?

Before I can panic, Pierce turns toward the hallway I noticed earlier. "Now, this way we have Tristan's private rooms"—he gestures to two closed doors as we pass them and then turns a corner and gestures to another—"a guest suite, and down here is my office." That door is open, and I glimpse a desk with a laptop and a pile of paperwork. We reach a T-intersection, and he points to the left. "Down there are Clive's and Anna's rooms, the laundry, and internal access to the garage." He leads us to the right, where one wall becomes multipaned glass windows with two pairs of french doors leading out onto the patio I saw from upstairs. "You're welcome to use the garden, of course, but don't mess around with the plants."

"That's no problem." Gardening's never been on my hobby list.

We reach another intersection. The hallway branches to the right, leading back toward the front door, and to the left is a set of open double doors leading into an open-plan kitchen, dining, and living area. There's another half turret, this one much bigger and set up as a sitting area, complete with a plush sofa and armchairs, a rug, and a coffee table. I can totally see myself napping on that sofa with the sun streaming through the windows. I hope it's comfortable.

There's a fireplace on one wall with a TV above it, more cushy furniture arranged to face it, and an alcove with an eight-seat dining table. The kitchen is obviously newer than the house but in a style that matches, and it's bigger than any kitchen I've ever seen in a private home.

A woman not much older than me with a shoulder-length brown mullet is sitting on one of the stools at the island, reading something on a tablet, and there's an older man wiping the sink. Anna and Clive? My stomach sinks when I see how Clive's dressed. Who wants to cook and clean while wearing a dress shirt with suit pants and suspenders? The only concession to comfort is his rolled-up sleeves. I really hope nobody's going to expect me to dress like that.

“Oh good,” Pierce is saying, “you’re both here. Clive, Anna, allow me to introduce Adam and Catrina Barale. Catrina is Nisha’s feeder, and Adam is going to be Tristan’s.”

Cat smiles sweetly and does that bow thing again, but I lift my hand in a little wave. If I’m going to live with these people, I gotta start as I mean to go on, right?

“Hey. Great to meet ya.”

Anna gets up and walks toward us, her gaze coolly assessing me from head to toe. It’s just a guess, but I don’t think she’s a vampire? I’ve only met three, but so far, they move differently from humans in a way I can’t explain. Anna’s graceful, but there’s a difference.

She holds out her hand, proving me right, and smiles. “Nice to meet you, Adam. Has anyone explained that I’m in charge of security here?”

I shake her hand—she’s got a good grip and more calluses than I do. “Yeah. Tristan said we’d need to discuss some stuff.”

She nods. “Once you’re settled in, we’ll find time. Meanwhile, welcome to Blackwood Place.”

“Blackwood Place?”

“The name of the house, young man.”

I look past Anna to where Clive is standing, arms crossed. He’s not frowning, but he’s not smiling either, and he doesn’t say anything else.

“Oh. I didn’t know it had a name.” Also, is he going to keep calling me “young man”? I’m not a fan.

“It was named after the family that built it. Do you have any food allergies?”

“Nope! I’m a pretty good eater.” I smile broadly at him.

He doesn’t smile back.

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Chapter 8

It's not until after we drop Nisha off and are headed to the Association that Cat and I can talk. Nisha, thankfully, wasn't too critical of my blunders. The only thing she said was that I'd picked up some bad habits from spending so much time around humans and that I might want to work on unlearning them. I'd smiled and agreed while secretly cursing Cat for not telling me anything I needed to know before I walked into that meeting.

Cat waits for me to switch from the back seat to the front before she pulls out of Nisha's driveway. We head to the end of the street, and she puts on her left blinker while she waits for a break in traffic.

"Aren't you going to say anything?" she prompts.

"I'm so fucking pissed at you."

She laughs, damn her. "Why? I just helped you get a job most people can only dream of."

I think about pointing out that they can only dream of it because they don't believe vampires exist, but there's no point in getting off topic. "I've never been so unprepared for something in my life, Cat, and that's counting the time I accidentally walked into an exam room for Advanced Physics instead of Renaissance Lit."

"I remember that. I still can't believe you sat the whole exam. Why didn't you leave when you realised you were in the wrong room?"

I've been asked that question many times, and I've never had a good answer. The truth is, I hate to back down from a challenge, and in the heat of the moment, taking an exam for a STEM subject I knew nothing about seemed like the ultimate challenge. One I failed miserably, of course.

“Don’t try to distract me. Why didn’t you prepare me for any of that?”

Sighing, she pulls out onto Toorak Road, almost cutting off a tradie in a ute who smashes his horn. Cat flips him off in the rearview mirror and admits, “I honestly didn’t think of it. It’s hard to understand what you don’t actually know, because I’ve always known it. Like… who taught you how to shake hands?”

“What do you mean? Nobody taught me; that’s just something… Oh.” I get it now. My whole life, I’ve seen people shaking hands when they meet—my parents, teachers, characters in media. It’s something I learned passively, and it would never occur to me to tell someone new to my culture that they should offer to shake hands when they meet people. I guess it’s the same for Cat with vampire customs.

“I’ll try to do better, but there’s a lot for you to learn. Anyway, maybe it’s better this way.”

“Better how?”

“Well, what would you have done if I’d told you never to touch or offer a touch to any vampire except your employer?”

“I would have asked why.”

“And when I told you that it’s a social custom that was put in place to protect feeders because vampires are dangerous?”

Oh. “I would have piked out,” I admit. “Are you serious? Dangerous how?”

The car jerks slightly as she whips her head around to give me an incredulous look. “They’re *vampires*, Adz. They’re predators with heightened strength and speed, and we’re their prey.”

What the fuck? “That’s definitely something you should have mentioned before! I just agreed to work for someone who considers me *prey*, for fuck’s sake.”

“Just like me,” she points out. “You’ll be fine; it’s not like it used to be. That’s why feeder families and the Association exist—to make things safer for both species. These days, it wouldn’t get you killed if you shook hands with a vampire, but it does tell them you have no freaking clue about customs and traditions, which is weird for a legacy.”

“And we’ve told them I’m a legacy, so we don’t want to get caught in the lie.” Ugh.

“It’s not a lie. You *are* a legacy. You just didn’t get the education you should have.”

I blow out a breath, thinking about that cracker apartment and quarter-of-a-million-dollar wage. “You need to catch me up, then. Tristan doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who’s okay with mistakes, and you said he’s sacked two people since February. I can’t fuck this up.” Or end up dead. Because no matter what Cat might say about things not getting me killed, the one thing I know for sure from pop culture is that vampires kill humans.

Cat makes a humming noise. “I can catch you up some, and we can get you the orientation guides the Association gives newbies. The most valuable stuff I can tell you is what newbies don’t know—the stuff you only learn if you grow up in a feeder family. Gossip and old scandals.”

“I can work with that. Start with the basics, though. I’m not supposed to touch any vampire except Tristan?”

“Not even him,” she corrects. “As a general rule, keep an arm’s-length distance between yourself and any vampire you don’t know. With the ones you do know, or that Tristan obviously trusts—like Pierce—you don’t need to be as strict about the distance, but still maintain polite social space. Over the years, the no-touch thing has turned into kind of an insult to vampires.”

I run that through my brain again. “Huh?”

“Like, if you’re not besties or their feeder and you get touchy-feely with them, you obviously don’t consider them a threat. You think they’re so weak that even you, a mere human, can take them down.”

I’m speechless. “That’s toxic bullshit.”

She shrugs and changes lanes to get around a car turning right. “Yeah, but vampire society is slow to evolve. Probably because a lot of them actually lived in times where toxic bullshit was the norm and they had to hunt humans in order to survive.”

“Great. Okay, so I keep a polite social distance from everyone. How does that work with Tristan drinking my blood?”

“It’s a pretty formal process, at least at first. Once you’ve been with him for a while, the two of you’ll find your own system, but initially it’s best to follow the Association protocol. They’ll go through it with you—they do for everyone, even legacies, because it’s a safety thing.”

That’s not filling me with confidence. “Give me the dot points.”

Cat sighs. “Right, so Tristan said he likes to feed in his office at six, yeah? So at six you go to his office, sit down, and offer him your wrist. Like this.” Without taking her eyes off the road, she extends her arm toward me, palm up, with her hand relaxed so it flops slightly.

“Does it matter which arm?”

She shakes her head as she returns her hand to the steering wheel. “No. He might have a preference, in which case he’ll tell you. Tristan’s been around a long time, Adz, so just follow his lead.”

I make a mental note to ask about that later—how long, exactly?—but stay focused. “And then he’ll just… bite me?”

“It’s not technically a bite since the lower jaw and teeth aren’t involved.”

I slowly turn to stare at her. “Seriously?”

She pulls a face. “Yeah, sorry. We all call it a bite anyway, even if it isn’t. So yeah, his fangs will pierce your skin and vein. He’ll suck for a few minutes, no more than twenty, and then he’ll lick the wound so it closes.”

“He’s going to *lick* me?” I add to my mental note that I need to wash my hands and wrists thoroughly before each feeding. I don’t know if bacteria can harm vampires, but I’m not going to screw myself out of a job. Would antibacterial soap taste shitty?

“He’s going to suck your blood out of your vein, and the licking is what’s worrying you?”

“No, just… Well, yeah. Why’s he gonna lick me?”

There’s that sigh again. “To close the wound. Vampire saliva has healing properties—that’s also how he’ll be able to feed twice a day without you becoming anaemic or anything. Though you’ll have to get regular checkups anyway. It’s a condition of your registration with the Association.”

“Yeah, yeah. Checkup,” I mutter, still fixed on healing saliva. “So I’m not going to end up with, like, vampire track marks?”

Cat shakes her head. “Nope. The bite marks and bruising from a standard feed will fade within a few hours. A prolonged feed will take a bit longer, but the rule is that if the site isn’t completely healed by the time for the next feed, your vampire *cannot* feed from you until you’ve been medically cleared. I’ve never heard of that happening, though.”

Dear universe, please don’t let me be the first such case that Cat hears of.

“That’s basically it for feeding. He’ll tell you beforehand if he’s going to need a prolonged feed, but once you get an idea of his routine, you’ll probably be able to guess. Days when he’s out and about with more accidental sun exposure, for example.”

“Yeah, about that.” I still have questions about feeding, but this has been bugging me. “The sun doesn’t hurt vampires?”

“It doesn’t kill them,” she corrects. “UV rays are harmful to all of us—you know that, you’re Australian. The thing with the fast-healing ability vampires have is that it uses a lot of blood, so when their systems race to heal the damage from the sun, they need to feed more to make up for it.”

My jaw drops. “You’re joking.”

“Nope.”

“So all those legends about vampires not being able to tolerate the sun, the whole reason they’re creatures of the night who live in coffins… it was because sunburn is bad for their skin?”

She huffs a laugh. “More or less. Quick history lesson, okay? Vampirism originated in the southern part of the Carpathian mountain range, in what’s now Romania. It wasn’t a densely populated area back then, and the problem with the population living mostly in small-to-medium villages is that someone notices when people go missing.”

“Why were they going missing? If vampires don’t have to kill to feed?”

“It was a different time, Adam.” She grimaces. “People were still freaked out from the plague, everyone was very religious, and nobody was lining up to have their blood sucked.”

“Okay, I get that, but… Wait, go back. You said it originated in Romania. Originated how?”

She shrugs. “Nobody’s entirely sure. Modern research has conclusively proved that it’s a virus—”

“*What?*”

“—and there are theories, given the time when it emerged, that it mutated from the plague. I don’t know if the science behind that holds up, though. I’ve never looked into it.”

“Vampirism is a virus?”

“Yep.”

“So theoretically we could catch it?” Jesus, I’m investing in as much hand sanitizer as I can afford. Would Tristan be offended if I started wearing masks?

“It’s only transmissible through blood and doesn’t activate until death.”

I don’t think my brain can keep up with all this new information. “Then the undead part is true?”

“Yes and no? They have heartbeats and all that, so they’re technically alive, but they did die to become vampires. The virus only lives in the bloodstream, so you’d need to be injected with or drink vampire blood while you were alive, but it stays dormant until you die. That’s why there aren’t as many new vampires these days—most of them were created during wars and plagues in Europe.”

“This is wild,” I say as Cat turns off King’s Way onto Coventry Street. “But what you’re saying is, they used to sleep during the day because it wasn’t easy to find someone to feed off? So they were doing their best to reduce their need for blood.”

“Basically, yeah.” We turn left onto Moray Street, and the car slows as Cat begins the hunt for a parking spot. “The transformation the virus causes leaves a new vampire low on blood and desperate to feed. When they rise, they’re so hungry they’re not always in their right minds—the stories get that part right. A lot of the early generations ripped through families and neighbours without knowing what was happening, so people naturally became wary of vampires.” She reverse parks neatly in a spot I would have sworn was too small for the Rover, turns off the engine, and looks at me with a smile. “Ready to get registered?”

I suck in a deep breath. “Fucked if I know.”

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Chapter 9

The Association of Registered Feeders is in what used to be a narrow-fronted Victorian row house but was given a fugly modern reno with render and big aluminium windows. From the street, it looks boringly innocent, just like the hundreds of similar once-homes in the inner suburbs that have been converted into medical practices, legal and architectural firms, and random small businesses. A discreet brass plaque beside the door identifies it as A.R.F. (Melbourne). Clearly, this is an "if you know, you know" type of place. Which makes sense, since they can't exactly put together a huge advertising display attracting humans to become vampire fodder.

I shudder. Not the best way for my brain to phrase it, now that I've agreed to become "fodder" myself.

"Don't just stand there." Cat reaches around me for the door handle, giving me a shove as she does. "Move it."

"Is this, like, a branch office?" I ask, obediently stepping in through the doorway. She follows, closing the door behind us. We're in a neat reception-slash-waiting area. It actually looks a lot like a doctor's waiting room—there's a desk with a raised front, behind which a middle-aged woman is typing industriously, and a line of chairs against the side wall. Two people are sitting there, waiting. Both look to be in their twenties, one dressed like a can't-be-fucked uni student, complete with textbook and highlighter, the other seemingly having read *Dracula* too many times while going through his impressionable teen years. I never thought I'd be able to point to a stranger and say, "He wants to feed and/or fuck a vampire," based on their looks, but even if I still didn't know vampires existed, I'd—

He shifts in his chair, and the light catches on his unnaturally pale skin. Is he wearing body glitter?

Cat's striding toward the desk, where the receptionist still hasn't glanced up, and I catch up with her.

"Good morning," she says in that almost formal tone she used at Tristan's house. "My cousin would like to register."

The receptionist still doesn't look up. My experience is in food service hospitality and retail rather than office work, but that doesn't stop my hackles going up. Front of house is front of house in any industry, and that means a goddamn *greeting*, at least.

She continues to type one-handed while passing Cat a clipboard with a form on it. "Fill this out, and we'll call you if—"

The sharp crack of the clipboard hitting the desk cuts her off, and her head lifts, eyes round with astonishment.

"We haven't met," Cat says, and this time her voice is sharp enough to cut glass. It's impressive. I wonder if she'll teach me that fuck-off-and-die tone. "I'm Catrina Barale. My cousin would like to register."

I bite back my grin. I've always wanted to be present for a "do you know who I am" moment. Cat throwing the family name around to get her way makes me want to cheer. Part of that might be because twenty-four hours ago I had no idea our name could even be used that way.

The woman blinks. "Catr— Did you say *Barale*?" Her gaze slides from Cat to me. I lift my hand and give my fingers a little wiggle.

"Hi. I'm Adam. Can we get this started? I told Tristan I'd be moved in before he needs to feed tonight."

Her face pales drastically. "T-Tr-Tristan?"

Cat runs out of patience. "Is Sarah here? Or anyone else?"

The receptionist stares blankly at her, seemingly overcome by the combination of our family name and Tristan's, but fortunately, footsteps approach from the hallway. Maybe whoever this is can help. They'd better be able to, because so far, I'm not all that impressed by the Association.

"Caroline," a voice says, "we're expecting a— Oh." The newcomer steps into view and spots us at the same time. She's older, a trendy grandma type, and the surprise on her face quickly morphs to a smile. "Hello, Cat. How nice to see you again. I should have guessed that you'd accompany your… brother?"

“Cousin,” Cat corrects with a matching smile. She moves forward to shake hands. “Meet Adam. Adz, this is Sarah Powell. She’s in charge of the A.R.F. here in Melbourne.”

I shake hands too. “Great to meet ya.”

“Oh, trust me, Adam, the pleasure is all mine. We’ve been in a panic trying to find another feeder for Tristan. I was almost ready to start loitering in bookstores and approaching people who bought vampire romances. And then Pierce calls and tells me not to worry, they’ve found a Barale for Tristan and he’ll be in today to register.” She shakes her head. “A *Barale*, when everyone knows the only one in Melbourne is Catrina. I thought he was joking.”

This is so weird. “My mother’s a Stewart,” I throw in helpfully. I’ve always been that person who likes to stir the pot of every fucked-up situation.

No joke, Sarah’s eyes light the fuck up. “Really? Any siblings?”

I grimace and shake my head. “Sorry, nope. Just me.”

“Don’t be sorry,” she assures me. “I’m not. You’re solving the biggest problem I’ve had to deal with my entire career. Come on, let’s get the paperwork started.” She gestures toward the hallway she came from.

“Hey! How come he’s going first? I’ve been here longer!”

Almost as one, we turn to where the wannabe-vampire-fucker has leapt to his feet. His goth-inspired makeup is poorly applied, telling me he’s not actually part of the goth culture, and he’s definitely wearing body glitter of some kind. His fists are planted on his hips, chin jutting angrily.

Sarah’s not impressed. “I’m sure it will be your turn soon, Mr…?”

“Spike.”

“Mr Spike. We—”

“Not mister. Just Spike.”

I clear my throat to keep from laughing. Seriously?

Sarah obviously feels some kind of way about this, because she audibly sighs, then glances over at the receptionist, Caroline. “What’s… Spike here for?”

“He has an appointment with Rowan.”

“Ah. Well, Spike, Rowan is running a little behind but should be ready for you soon.” She turns away and leads me and Cat down the hall, leaving Spike sputtering behind us.

“What was with the glitter?” I murmur to my cousin as we follow, and she shoots me a sidelong glance.

“*Twilight*.” At my confused face, she adds, “It’s a book and movie series. The vampires sparkle in the sun. He’s hedging his bets with all parts of vampire pop culture.”

“The vampires *sparkle*?” I’m not sure if that’s fucked-up or ingenious. I might have to check that series out. “Wait, so he’s never met an actual vampire? Why’s he here, then?”

Cat shrugs, uninterested, but Sarah answers over her shoulder. “Sometimes people find out about us through friends who are feeders—or even friends of friends. They usually think it’s a scam of some kind but can’t resist coming in anyway. Other times, they accidentally witness a feeding at nighttime. Nightclubs have always been excellent places for vampires to find dinner, what with all the confusion and alcohol that’s blurring senses.”

The concept of a meat market suddenly takes on a frightening new meaning. “Wouldn’t that be an ideal time for a memory wipe? If a random human saw a vampire feeding?”

Sarah nods as we ascend a staircase. “If the vampire noticed, of course. But many humans in that position sneak away. Sometimes they convince themselves they imagined it, and everything’s fine. It’s the ones who can’t stop thinking about it who potentially could cause trouble. They usually fall into two camps, the ones who want to hunt vampires, and the ones who want to be hunted by them.” She shrugs as we reach the top and turn left. “Both groups ask the same kinds of questions, and we have people listening out for them.”

I’m still thinking about that as we enter a small but tidy office. “So the people who are listening for those questions, they decide whether to fob people off or suggest they come here?”

Taking a seat behind the desk, Sarah nods. “Exactly. I have to say, I always forget how sheltered you legacies are. Growing up surrounded by vampire lore and culture and having older relatives in active feeder contracts, it never seems to occur to you what it’s like for outsiders. I wish everyone could have your experience, Adam.”

I’m pretty sure she doesn’t, but I can’t say that. “It’s practically a whole new world for me,” I say instead—completely truthfully. “One more question?”

She laughs. “As many as you like. This is literally my job, and I could talk about it all day.”

“Ha ha, I bet. The whole nightclub feeding thing—isn’t that dangerous?”

Her smile slips away. “Yes. For both humans and vampires. But there are too many vampires without feeders, and we can’t expect them to starve.”

“No, of course not,” I murmur, sinking into a chair beside Cat.

“Now, Pierce sent me a copy of your contract. Have you seen it yet?”

“Not yet.”

“It’s his first contract, obviously,” Cat adds. “Would you mind going through all the clauses with him?”

Sarah beams. “I’d be delighted to. We can read through it together. I do need you to do some other paperwork first, though. Pierce said you were starting your contract tonight, which means we’ve got a lot to cram into today if we’re going to get you registered.”

She really means it. We start with basic information—my name, date of birth, parents’ names, contact details—then move on to medical history, a mental health survey, and a bunch of other stuff that all blurs together. She takes me downstairs to a room that’s set up like the kind of lab I’ve seen on crime TV shows and introduces me to the on-staff pathologist. An *actual* pathologist, not a phlebotomist or a nurse. He takes some blood and urine samples and does a whole bunch of rapid tests for I don’t even ask what, then goes through my medical history with me before taking me across the hall and introducing me to Rowan, the staff psychologist. I spend an hour there, mostly chatting casually, though I’m pretty sure Rowan is getting more out of it than just chat.

Finally, Sarah comes to get me and takes me back upstairs to her office. “Thanks so much for your patience,” she says. “If we’d known ahead of time that you’d be in today, we would have planned better.”

“Totally my fault.” Planned what better?

“At least we can issue you an interim registration before your first feeding with Tristan,” she declares with an air of relief. “There are a couple of pathology tests that need forty-eight hours to run, but everything else is set to go. Rowan was very pleased—he thinks you’re going to be an excellent long-term feeder, and god knows we need more of those.”

This is veering into territory I don’t know much about, and Cat’s long gone—I told her not to hang around, since there was nothing for her to do. So I smile and nod sympathetically but say nothing.

Sarah puts a tablet on the desk between us. “Okay, let’s go over this contract. First contracts are usually A.R.F. boilerplate ones, but Tristan’s never been one to adhere to minimum standards. The last two feeders we sent him had interesting contracts.”

I don’t know if I should be happy about that or not. “Interesting how?”

She shrugs. “I can’t discuss anyone else’s contract with you, but let’s see what he’s put in this one.”

Reading a legal document that gives someone the right to literally suck the blood from my veins? Sounds like a fun way to spend the afternoon. “Sure.”

The first few pages are boring as fuck, basically saying that I’ll live in Tristan’s house, that he’s obligated to provide me with at least one room and a bathroom for my private use, that those rooms will be cleaned regularly and otherwise maintained at a standard fit for human occupation, that I’ll be provided with a minimum of three nutritious meals per day, that I’m obliged to eat said meals and to maintain a baseline level of health, and that if I contract an illness—any illness ranging from the common cold to cancer, with everything in between—it’s my responsibility to report my change in health to Tristan and to seek medical attention immediately, blah, blah, blah…

I’m free to come and go from the house as I choose, as long as I make myself available twice per day for feeding at an agreed upon time. Tristan will provide a car and driver-slash-bodyguard for my use, and should I choose not to make use of said driver-slash-bodyguard, I accept that I might be at risk of kidnapping or other bodily harm.

I make a mental note to ask Cat about that. It’s come up twice now—who the fuck is Tristan, that someone might kidnap me to get to him? Mega wealthy or mega dickhead? Or both?

“Wow,” Sarah says, interrupting herself midsentence. “You must have made quite an impression on him.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. You probably know that currently starting contracts are for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars per year.” She glances up at me, and I’m already nodding. “Tristan is known for being generous, and even with new

feeders, he usually offers a little more." She quirks a brow. "This is *quite* a bit more."

Fuck yeah! "How much?"

"Three hundred thousand. *But*, if after the first year you both agree to the two-year extension, that goes up to four fifty per year."

That's one point two million dollars for three years, with no living expenses. Tristan really is generous.

Is it pessimistic of me to wonder what the catch is?

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Chapter 10

I STARE at the office door, all the gung-ho energy that's been driving me today suddenly gone. I have to knock or I'll be late for Tristan's preferred feeding time—late on the first day of work is never a good look, and Tristan doesn't seem like the type of boss who'd be okay with it any day—but if I knock, I'll actually have to walk in there, offer my vein to a motherfucking vampire, and let him drink my blood. I don't know if I'm ready for that.

Is anyone ever ready for that?

Sucking in air, I lift my hand, hesitate, make a fist, hesitate again, and—

The door opens.

My startled gaze locks onto Tristan's face, which somehow manages to be expressionless while also conveying annoyance. That's a pretty cool trick.

"If you're going to come in, please do so," he says coolly, stepping back and to the side to give me room. "If you've changed your mind about this position, now would be the appropriate time to inform me. The Association is unlikely to send a temp before tomorrow as it is."

"I'm not changing my mind." The words come out before I can make a conscious decision about it. I guess that's my subconscious mind's desire? Kind of like when you flip a coin and get disappointed by the outcome, so you know the other option was what you really wanted. Only, I'm not convinced that what I really want is to be vampire food.

Regardless, I walk past him. He's left me plenty of space and we don't touch at all, but the side of my body that's closest to him gets… tingly. No,

not tingly, creepy. Like all the hair there is standing on end, even though it's not. I don't know how to describe it, other than weird.

"There is no shame in realising you've made the wrong decision," he continues, still standing beside the open door as I reach the desk. "I wouldn't hold any animosity toward—"

"I didn't make the wrong decision, and I'm not changing my mind."

His expression doesn't change, but he does wait another beat before closing the door. I expect the finality of the latch clicking to stir something in me—regret? Panic?—but there's nothing more than the same low-key nervous anticipation that comes with every new job I've started. I guess deep down I really am okay with doing this.

"Where do you want me?" I ask, and he gestures silently to the half turret. It takes only a few steps to get there, and I'm halfway into sitting in one of the armchairs when he stops me.

"On the bench." He's still standing by the door, and as I glance over, I finally notice that he looks different from this morning. For one thing, he's taken off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves, leaving his pale forearms bare. They're slender, his wrists almost delicate-looking, but even from here I can see muscle tone. It would be a mistake to underestimate his strength, even without the added element of him being a vampire.

Wait… do vampires have super strength? I need to add that to my list of things to ask Cat. Or maybe it's in the Association welcome pack that Sarah gave me. She said something about me not needing it since I'm a legacy but that regulations required her to give it to me.

In the meantime, I get up from the chair and move to the upholstered bench under the window. The blinds are down against the gloom of twilight, which is a huge relief. The garden might be private, but the idea of anyone having even the chance to watch this gives me the ick.

Tristan walks toward me, his movements fluid, elegant… efficient? It's a weird way to describe how someone walks, but it fits. My gaze goes to his hair, which has fought its way free of whatever styling product he used. The curls are a bit wilder, no longer lying in place, and if he was human, I'd be itching to run my fingers through them and mess them up some more—preferably while kissing that red mouth. As it is, the itch is no more than a passing tingle in my fingertips. Completely ignorable.

He sits gracefully on the bench beside me, but not too close. I reckon I could fit a ruler into the space between us, one of those standard thirty-

centimetre ones we used to use at school. It's a respectable amount of space, the kind that indicates colleagues or acquaintances—people who know each other but aren't particularly close. I'm… surprised? Cat said all I'd need to do is hold out my wrist, but I guess I still expected this to be an intimate experience. Maybe I need to watch fewer vampire movies and TV shows—they always manage to make bloodsucking seem either deadly or sexy.

"The Association couriered my copy of the signed contract," Tristan says, making me jump slightly. His eyes narrow but he continues, "Did they give you one also?"

I nod. "Yeah. Uh, thanks for the generous terms."

"Thanks aren't necessary. If you prove acceptable to me, it's in my best interest to ensure you want to stay for the maximum permitted period. Finding feeders that suit my needs is difficult."

Suit his needs? What needs? Other than providing blood and keeping their mouth shut about it, there's nothing else a feeder needs to do! Unless there's something extra Tristan expects? He didn't include it in the contract, or Sarah would have mentioned it… right?

Fuck, I want to ask, but I'm too worried about getting caught in the lie Cat and I have been telling. So instead, I make a noncommittal "Hm" sound.

His eyes search my face. I'm not sure what he sees, but it must satisfy him. "I understand your things were delivered this afternoon. Are your rooms satisfactory?"

"They're great," I admit. "Anna showed me where I can park my car, too."

He nods. "If there's anything you need, you've only to let Clive know. If he can't arrange it, he'll tell Pierce or me."

"Thanks, that's nice of you, but I don't really need that much. Anna mentioned that Clive's making moussaka for dinner tonight, and that's already way better than anything I could have made myself." She also said his spanakopita is amazing, so I'm hoping there's some of that too.

Tristan nods again. "I don't believe we discussed this earlier, but you are welcome to have guests here. They will need to be approved by Anna first, however."

So, no bringing home spontaneous bar hookups. "No worries. It's probably just going to be Cat, anyway. Most of my friends are from my human life, and I wouldn't want to risk them learning stuff they shouldn't."

His face doesn’t change, but I get the impression he approves of my discretion. That’s gotta be a first—I’m not known for being discreet.

I *am* known for being impatient, and now that I’ve made up my mind to do this, I kind of want to get it done. Maybe Tristan likes chit-chat before he feeds or maybe this is a first-time thing, to make me comfortable, but either way, I’m over it.

“So, uh… you hungry?” I extend my arm toward him, wrist up, hand relaxed just like Cat showed me. I wore only a T-shirt specifically to avoid any awkward sleeve situations, and the veins in my wrist are clearly visible through their thin layer of skin.

He scoffs lightly, his fangs flashing, and butterflies erupt in my stomach. Fuck, I’m really doing this. I expect him to reply, to say something about how he missed breakfast this morning or hasn’t eaten since the temp was here last night—

The stabbing, searing pain in my wrist catches me off guard. I didn’t even see him take hold of it, he moved that fast, and now… holy fuuuuuck. What is this?

A lone tear rolls down my cheek, a remnant of the pain, and more moisture clings to my lower lashes, but other than that first moment, it doesn’t hurt. It doesn’t exactly feel good, either. It… I don’t even know. Tristan is sucking my wrist, and not lightly, either. There’s strong pressure there, a drawing feeling, dampness. From his mouth? Or is there blood on my arm? I can’t see with his head in the way, but it can’t be blood. He wouldn’t let it go to waste like that, would he?

As the minutes pass and nothing new happens, I begin to relax. It’s not until my muscles release their tension that I realise how tightly I was wound. Tristan’s gaze flicks up to meet mine for a second, like he can feel the difference in me—well, he probably can. He’s got his hands wrapped around my forearm and his mouth on my wrist.

His mouth. On. Me.

A light shiver rolls down my spine. The only contact between us is on my arm, with the rest of our bodies still that respectable ruler length apart, but fuck me, was I ever wrong before. This is intimate—so very intimate. I’m feeding him from my body.

My breathing picks up pace, and as my heart rate speeds up to match, his gaze lifts to me again. This time there’s a question in it, and I shake my head. It’s a small movement, and I’m not sure if I’m telling him not to

worry or just expressing disbelief at this whole insane situation, but he must take assurance from it, because his attention returns to what he's doing.

Which is drinking my blood.

I lean back against the window and try to understand how so much of my life could have changed in less than twenty-four hours. This time yesterday I was picking up my stuff from my old job and telling my manager to go fuck himself. I had no idea that vampires were real and would have pissed myself laughing if anyone had suggested they were. I had no idea that my family has spent the past few hundred years curating a position as the tastiest treat a vampire can find. What even is that? Like, did great-great-something-grandpa wake up one morning and decide that the best way to secure the well-being of his descendants was to advertise how delicious we taste and train up the kids to enjoy being bitten?

Wait… am I enjoying this?

The thought pulls me up short. Am I? I don't love it or anything, but I don't hate it, either. It's not going to bother me to let Tristan do this twice a day for the next year, anyway. That should probably disturb me, right? Does it make me one of those weird vampire lovers with zombie brains who can think of nothing except getting bitten?

I'm still mentally debating that a while later when the suction of Tristan's mouth begins to lessen. I glance over at that too-perfect face bent over my arm, and that's when the sucking stops and his tongue swipes over my skin. Once, twice… and he lifts his head, licking a stray droplet of blood from the corner of his mouth, fangs on full display, eyes dark and slumberous.

Vampire.

I swallow hard. It's stupid. I knew he was a vampire. I signed a fucking contract that said it, in black and white. He literally just finished sucking my blood. But the sight of him right now slams it home in my brain like nothing else has.

"Are—" I stop and clear my throat. My voice is all rusty. "Are you done?" Wincing, I add, "I mean, is there anything else you need?" That's not much better, but I don't think I have the brain power to make the right words. Make the words? That doesn't sound right. We don't make words, we make… stuff.

"Stuff," I murmur, then giggle. That's such a funny word to say. "Stuffff." I grin at Tristan, who's eyeing me curiously. He lets go of my

arm, and the extra weight makes me sway.

He sighs. “Did you have lunch today, Adam?”

Lunch? Lunch! “I meant to, but I took longer at the ’Socion than I thought.” I blink, suddenly a bit sleepy.

Tristan sighs again, and then in the time between one heartbeat and the next, he has me up from the bench and moved to one of the armchairs. My head lolls against the back of it as I blink up at him in astonishment. I guess that answers the question about super strength. I’m not exactly a lightweight.

“Why’d ya move meeee?” I ask, surprised by how slurry the words come out, but he’s gone. How rude.

I stare up at the ceiling for long seconds. I need to get up, get some of that moussaka Anna was talking about, and then finish setting up my Xbox, but I’m just gonna rest for a—

“Adam?” Anna leans over me. “You idiot. On the first feed, too. Here.” She slides a hand behind my head and holds a glass to my mouth, and when salty-sweet liquid touches my lips, I part them and drink. She lets me have a few mouthfuls before pulling it away and replacing it with… chocolate?

I manage to lift my heavy arm and push it away. “Spoil m’dinner.”

She huffs. “Mate, that’s the least of your worries right now.”

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Chapter 11

"For god's sake, Adam, hold still," Anna snaps, pushing me back onto the couch.

"I'm fine," I protest, but no matter which way I squirm, there's zero chance of me getting away from her. She may not be as big as I am, but she's got serious muscle and no hesitation about using it. Case in point, she practically carried me here from the office.

Giving up, I flop back against the squashy couch cushions and let her put the blood pressure cuff on my arm.

"I'm really fine," I mutter, but she's already inflating it and ignoring me completely. I've got nobody to blame but myself, since I'm the idiot who didn't eat or drink anything for ten hours before donating blood. Technically, I'm in breach of the contract I signed just a few hours ago. Tristan is contractually obliged to ensure food is provided for me, but I'm the one who's in charge of making sure I actually eat. I fucked up.

Anna looks from the readout on the machine to the printout in her hand that has my baseline stats that were taken by the pathologist today. I had to sign a bunch of consent forms saying it was okay for them to send the information to Tristan's household to use in situations like this. Pretty sure none of us expected it to be needed this soon.

"Okay, you're good," Anna says at last, taking her pointy knee off my leg and letting me up. I move to the edge of my seat and rip open the Velcro cuff. "I hope you don't plan on doing this again."

"I didn't plan on doing it this time," I whine, passing her the cuff so she can put the machine away. "It was a busy day and I didn't think, that's all.

I'll be more careful from now on."

A sniff that's loud and obnoxious enough to be heard from the moon has me turning toward the kitchen. Clive's glare is fucking impressive—or it would be if it wasn't aimed at me.

"I promise," I add. He's been fuming from the second Anna dragged me in here, and I really don't need the man responsible for my meals pissed off at me.

"Forgive me if I don't set much store in your promises." He slams a drawer shut and stomps through a door that I've been told leads to a butler's pantry and is off-limits to me. I planned to sneak down and have a look later tonight, after Clive went to bed, but now I think I might wait until he's in a better mood. The last thing I need is for him to catch me.

"I don't think he likes me much," I tell Anna.

"Right now, *I* don't like you much, and I'm not as protective of Tristan as Clive is. How can you not know how much you fucked up?"

Okay, this is starting to annoy me. How many times does a guy need to apologise? "I do know how much I fucked up, and I'm sorry. It was a genuine accident. It won't happen again. What more do I need to say?" Though that reminds me—if I need to feed Tristan again at six in the morning, I'd better make sure I have a snack first. That's earlier than I usually like to eat, but hey, we all need to make sacrifices sometimes.

Anna's lips are pressed into a tight line. "It's not about what you say. We don't know you, you've been hired for an incredibly important job that requires a high level of trust, and you fucked up the first time you had to do anything. You can see why we might be hesitant, right?"

When she puts it like that… I blow out a breath. "Yeah. Okay, so I gotta earn your trust. I can do that. I'm not usually a fuckup at work, I swear." I ignore the little voice reminding me of all the times I did, in fact, fuck up at work. Most of those times were deliberate, and I don't plan on doing that here.

She doesn't look like she's ready to be my bestie, but her expression does soften a little, from granite to… limestone? I don't fucking know. What's a softer stone than granite?

Shooting a cautious glance toward the butler's pantry, she leans closer to me. "Clive's going to be a tough sell. He's worked for Tristan since he was old enough to even have a job, and he grew up in his house before this one."

“Really?”

Anna nods. “That’s what I’ve heard. I don’t know all the details, but apparently his mum was Tristan’s feeder when Clive was a little kid, and he just never left.”

“*What?*”

She shushes me, and I lower my voice. “Sorry. I just wasn’t expecting you to say that.”

Her brows rise. “Right? Since when does anyone work as a full-time feeder once they’ve started their family? You know what it’s like—a parent might temp, but it’s practically a rule that once you’ve got a kid, feeding is no longer an option. That’s the way I always heard it, anyway.”

That wasn’t what I was thinking at all, since I hadn’t even thought about the implications of being on call for a vampire while trying to raise a child. I was stuck on the idea of a parent willingly bringing their little kid to live in a house occupied by vampires. Not that I think Tristan would hurt a kid… but then, I hardly know him. Or any vampire. Maybe small children are delicacies for them.

My gorge rises, and I swallow hard. Definitely need to ask Cat about that. I’m not staying if it turns out vampires eat kids.

For now, though, there’s something about Anna’s phrasing… “So you’re a legacy too? I mean, you grew up in a feeder family?”

She shrugs. “Yeah, of course. Tristan’s hardly going to hire a random human off the street and give them access to vampire secrets.”

I force a chuckle. “Yeah, nah, of course. I just meant, what made you choose security instead of being a feeder yourself?” The words are barely out of my mouth before I’m wondering if I just stuck my foot in it. What if she applied to be a feeder but her registration was rejected? Or no vampire hired her?

“It’s an interesting story, actually,” she says, and I relax. Good thing she wasn’t taking my blood pressure right then since I’m pretty sure it was through the roof. “When I was a kid, I’d always planned to be a feeder—family tradition, y’know? And it’s not like it’s a lifelong career. Ten years and then you’re out, right? I figured I’d register at twenty-one, as soon as I was eligible, and until then I could go to uni and see if anything interested me for my second career.”

Ten years and then you’re out. I didn’t know that. Why would there be a ten-year limit? Is feeding bad for a human’s health? “Checks out,” I

murmur, wondering how soon I can sneak away to call Cat. Fuck, is it safe to call her while Tristan's in the house? Vampires have super hearing, but how super is super?

"Yeah, so I was at uni, taking a billion electives that weren't going to add up to an actual degree, and my older sister was kidnapped by the Helsing Sect and held for ransom until her vampire turned himself over."

I blink at her, my mouth hanging open. "*What?*"

She pulls a face and nods. "I'm surprised you didn't hear about it, although I guess you are younger than me, and it was kept pretty hush hush."

The sound that comes out of my mouth is definitely not a word. I pull myself together. "My parents sheltered me a lot," I manage. "Uh, when was this?"

"About fifteen years ago? Yeah, it was halfway through my second year, so almost fifteen years exactly."

I nod like that makes it make sense that I know nothing about… did she say *Helsing* Sect? Like the movie character? "I was thirteen. My parents kept a lot of stuff from me when they could." Like the entire existence of vampires and our family's connection to them.

"A lot of parents do that," she agrees. "Especially in our community. It's not always an easy one, am I right?"

"Right. Yeah." Kidnapped. Ransomed. What did they want the vampire for?

"My sister was fine physically but she's still got PTSD from everything she went through, especially seeing her vampire murdered—"

Holy fucking Christ, *what*?

"—and it was traumatic for a lot of us. Vampires are so strong that it's hard for anyone to hurt them, but the humans in their lives are their weaknesses, especially their feeders. Long-term feeders even more so. It's a special relationship—well, you get that. You wouldn't have registered if you weren't invested in making that kind of commitment."

My brain is working overtime trying to take in what she's saying while also attempting to remember the details of *Van Helsing*. My parents insisted vampire movies were garbage and wouldn't allow them in the house—which makes a lot more sense now—but I watched it one time at a friend's place when I was a teenager. The main character was a vampire hunter, or

maybe a generic monster hunter? And I think the Catholic Church was involved?

"Definitely," I say, needing her to keep talking. "It's a special commitment."

"It's what made up my mind. Joseph—my sister's vampire—didn't hesitate to surrender himself to the sect, even though he knew his chances of surviving it were non-existent. Feeders make themselves vulnerable to vampires, and the good ones respect that and protect their feeders in return, but options are limited. Unless they keep their feeders with them twenty-four seven, which violates the rights the Association fought to gain, they can't guarantee safety. My goal—and Tristan is helping me with this—is to establish a network of human security agents to protect feeders *and* vampires. The sect members are human, and as humans we have a unique understanding of how they think that vampires don't."

I'm pretty sure I, a human, don't have any understanding of how a bunch of people who named themselves after a fictional vampire killer—Wait. Was Van Helsing not fictional after all? I mean, vampires exist, so why not mythical vampire hunters?

Anna's looking at me expectantly, so I push aside the millions of questions I now have and say, "That's a great idea. I bet there are tons of legacies that don't want to be feeders and have the right talents."

"Exactly! We already had people from feeder families getting jobs as housekeepers, drivers, and assistants to vampires. We've got lawyers and accountants and all the other professionals, too. Ignoring personal security was stupid. Just because vampires are naturally stronger than humans doesn't mean they have the skills to protect themselves. My cousin's vampire is an author, and she's so invested in the fantasy world she writes in that she barely remembers to feed. She's not going to notice a possible security threat."

A vampire author. Sure. Why not? Vampires are people too.

"Anyway," Anna continues, in the tone of someone wrapping up the conversation, "that's my origin story. I dropped out of uni and started taking classes in martial arts, hand-to-hand fighting, weapons, defensive driving… anything I thought might be useful. Even with all that, nobody wanted to take me seriously. I finally decided that if I was going to make a change, it needed to start at the top, and I called in so many favours owed to my family to get a meeting with Tristan." She shakes her head, smiling ruefully.

“Honestly, not even I thought he’d be on board. I figured I could plant a seed and maybe one day he might look into it further. But he heard me out, asked a shit ton of questions, then hired me to protect his feeder and begin working on a security network that could eventually be rolled out to all vampires.”

I smile weakly, my head spinning for the second time today, though this time it has nothing to do with my blood pressure. “Wow.”

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Chapter 12

For possibly the first time ever, the strident tone of my alarm going off doesn't drag me reluctantly from sleep—purely because I haven't been to sleep. I meant to, but who the fuck can sleep with this many questions racing around their brain?

Silencing the alarm, I slump back against my headboard—because this fancy bed has a cushy upholstered headboard—and rub my eyes. They're dry and tired, but I doubt I could sleep even now. I didn't intend to stay up all night, but after I texted Cat, I picked up the Association's orientation guide to flip through while waiting for her to reply. A phone call might have been faster, but since I don't know how good Tristan's hearing actually is, I wasn't willing to risk it.

Cat never texted back, and I read the whole guide. There's some pretty valuable information in there—like, not all vampires can afford a feeder. That makes sense, when you consider our base salary plus all the other expenses. A lot of older vampires have money because they've been around a long time and have had the chance to let their wealth accumulate. I never really stopped to think about how humans' limited lifespans impact so many of our decisions, including how we invest our money—not that I've ever had money to invest. But if you know you have time to let an investment mature for a hundred years or so, it might change your strategy.

Anyway, most of the time those older vampires help the younger ones in their nest—the ones they sired—to get established, but until the younger vampires have enough annual income to cover the cost of a feeder *and* their own living expenses, they have to source their own food, which means

seeking out appropriate humans, feeding, and then mind-wiping. The guide didn't go into more detail than that since the information was aimed at encouraging new feeders to help recruit friends. Even though not all vampires can afford feeders, there's still a feeder shortage. Not everyone meets the criteria for the job.

After that, I spent hours searching the internet for any information about vampire hunters that sounded even a little bit realistic while making a list of questions to ask my cousin. One thing I learned is that people are fucked up. Like, for real. I *hope* most of what I found about vampire hunters is made up, because if it's not, there are a shit ton of dangerous, armed people out there who need to be locked up.

I mean, I kind of get how vampire hunters came to exist. You see a ravening monster with incredible strength rip apart your home and your loved ones, and your first instinct isn't going to be to let them go about their life afterwards. You're not going to hear about another monster preying on others nearby and think, Hey, it's cool. For sure you grab your pitchfork or whatever and hunt those fuckers down.

But in this day and age, with registered feeders and vampires *not* killing indiscriminately, hunting them down and murdering them solely because they exist makes the hunter the monster.

Though I could be wrong. It's not like the websites I found are verified sources, and I'm too new to the feeder-slash-vampire community to know much about it. Maybe there are still vampires who rip the insides out of people and feed until they're dead—I wouldn't know. Cat would know, but she hasn't even read my text yet, which is weird. She's usually surgically attached to her phone.

In the meantime, I need to get up and get downstairs to feed my vampire.

My vampire. That's so weird. I try saying it out loud.

"My vampire. *My* vampire."

Nope, can't do it. I'm going to stick to "my boss" or "Tristan." The idea of having a vampire, no matter what the context, just doesn't feel right.

I stumble into the bathroom to piss and brush my teeth. I should probably get dressed and try to impress Tristan with my professionalism since I failed at that so spectacularly last night, but as soon as I get hold of Cat, I plan to crawl back into bed for a nap, so it doesn't seem worth the effort.

Checking my phone for a response from my cousin one last time before I head downstairs, I remind myself what I read in the orientation guide last night. The enzymes in vampire saliva don't just heal the bite wound, they help to build blood. That's how vampires can feed twice a day, every day on the same person without killing them or making them sick. Over time, those enzymes build up and the acceleration of blood cell production can become dangerous to the feeder—which is one of the reasons why a full-time feeder career is capped at ten years. The ten years doesn't have to be consecutive, so if, for example, Tristan and I decide after a year that we don't want to extend the contract, I could take some time off, then find another vampire to work for whenever I want and still have nine years left.

Wild, huh?

Downstairs, the house is quiet, but in that early morning "someone is awake but trying not to disturb the peace" way. The house is a comfortable temperature, even with me just wearing my boxers and a T-shirt, and given how cool the mornings are at this time of year, I suspect that means the heater is on.

I turn left and head down the corridor toward the kitchen as I was instructed to do last night. Clive insisted that I needed to have breakfast this morning before feeding—which I couldn't really argue with—but when I made a face and said I'm not used to eating breakfast, and especially not before six a.m., he glared and said he'd make sure it was a light one.

It's still dark outside, though the sky will probably start lightening soon, but the lights are on in the big living area, and the television is set to one of the breakfast shows. I wonder who the fan of morning TV is, Anna or Clive. They're both here already, Anna perched on one of the stools at the island, drinking coffee, while Clive's grating somethi—

Is that a potato?

Oh my god, is he making hash browns?

Suddenly, my mouth is watering. I fucking love hash browns. If anything is going to convince me to have breakfast at this ungodly hour, it's going to be hash browns.

"Good morning," Anna says. "Did you sl— Wow. I'm guessing you didn't sleep well." She eyes me critically as I get closer. "Your eyes are so bloodshot, they look like a map of the London Underground."

My laugh takes me by surprise. "Good one. I, uh, stayed up late reading."

She blinks a few times. “Really?”

“Yeah. I can read, you know.” Not that I do much of it, but she shouldn’t make assumptions. Even if they’re right.

I slide onto the stool next to hers and direct a winning smile at Clive. “Good morning, Clive. I’m reporting for breakfast.”

He doesn’t smile back. He doesn’t reply, either, just puts down the grater and potato, goes to the sink to wash his hands, and disappears into the butler’s pantry.

I turn to Anna and whisper, “He really holds a grudge, huh?”

“When it comes to Tristan, absolutely. But in this case, I think he went to get your breakfast.”

My eyes dart to the pile of grated potato. “But…”

She follows the direction of my gaze and shakes her head. “That won’t be ready before you need to feed Tristan. He’s got something else for you to have now.”

“Oh.” I hope that doesn’t mean I miss out.

Clive comes back into the main part of the kitchen holding a tall glass. The liquid inside is a grey-brown colour and looks like sludge. He sets it on the island and slides it over to me.

“What’s this?” I ask cautiously. Please don’t let him say I have to drink it.

“A protein shake,” he informs me. “It’s packed with nutrients and fibre.”

Is it, though? From the looks of it, it’s packed with something else entirely. “I don’t really—”

“Drink it.” He folds his arms across his chest and glares at me.

I mentally weigh the fallout of upsetting him, which everyone in this house has told me not to do, against having to drink that disgusting-looking concoction. I’m so tempted to say no, but… did I mention the upholstered headboard? The bathroom with no mould that’s exclusively for my use? The deconstructed hash browns that I’ll hopefully be eating in an hour’s time?

Blowing out an explosive breath, I pick up the glass and study the contents. God, it looks so fucking foul. I’m not exactly a stranger to protein shakes, but this one wins a prize for least appealing.

I lift it toward my mouth, catch a whiff of it, and nearly lose my nerve. What did he even put in there? I’m scared to ask. Could this be some kind

of hazing activity, or a test? See if the new bloke will run away within the first twenty-four hours?

"It's ten to six," Anna says. "If you're going to drink that, you'd better get on with it." She's watching with a tiny smile of amusement, giving even more credibility to my hazing theory.

Ugh. Okay, time to get this over with. I chug.

And nearly gag. Grimly, I keep going, forcing myself to drink fast in an attempt to avoid the taste—and the texture. Why is it slimy?

By the time I smack the glass back down on the bench, my face is instinctively pulling into the type of expressions it hasn't made since I was eight and had to take gross medicine.

"What the hell was that? No—don't tell me." I hold up a hand. There's a non-zero chance that Clive is going to make me drink one of these again at some point—hopefully not as soon as tomorrow—and it's better if I don't know what it is.

"It's good for you," he tells me with a sniff. "You don't want to almost pass out while doing your job, do you? Oh, wait… you already did that."

Yikes. Clive's got claws. I force a smile, but I'm pretty sure it's mostly teeth. "Thanks for making that for me."

His eyes narrow, but he turns away without saying anything else.

"Here." Anna passes me a glass of water. "Rinse the taste out of your mouth."

I take a few big swallows, and by the time I set the glass down, there's a mug sitting in front of me. A mug with frothy milk topped with powdered chocolate. I eye it suspiciously. "What's this?"

"Cappuccino," Clive says shortly. "You can take it with you. Tristan doesn't mind."

"You made me a cappuccino?" I do *not* understand this guy.

"That's your coffee preference, isn't it?"

"For breakfast, yes," I agree. Then, because he's genuinely done something nice for me even if I don't understand it, I add, "Thank you." The mug is warm between my hands when I lift it, the gorgeous aroma of coffee wafting to my nose, and I take a careful sip. It's the perfect temperature, and even better, it's just flat-out fuckin' perfect. My moan is involuntary.

"You'd better go," Anna says, grinning. "You can have alone time with your coffee later."

I’m not sure if we’re good enough friends yet for me to flip her off. Probably not, especially since we’re also colleagues in our place of work. I settle for glaring at her instead, then slide off the stool, mug cradled close, and head for the door.

Tristan’s office door is ajar this morning, and I tap lightly on it as I push it further open. He’d have closed it if he didn’t want me to walk right in… right?

He looks up from where he’s bent over his desk, writing something in a fancy-looking notebook. He’s already wearing most of his suit, though not his jacket, and his hair is perfectly in place. “Thank you for being on time.” His gaze skims over me, and if he disapproves of my pj’s or my coffee, nothing in his expression gives it away. “Have you eaten this morning?”

I wince. “Yeah, Clive gave me this protein shake thing that tasted like grave dirt that’d been shat in. Look, I’m sorry about last night. I swear I’m not usually that irresponsible. It won’t happen again.”

“No, it won’t.” He doesn’t say anything else, but the warning is clear. I’ve had my one strike, and if I fuck up again, I’ll go the same way as the two feeders that came before me.

“It won’t,” I agree fervently. “Uh, Clive said you wouldn’t mind if I brought the coffee, but I can put it down if you prefer.”

He turns toward the half turret, dismissing my offer with a casual wave. “Don’t spill it on me while I’m feeding.”

Well, there’s a new fear unlocked. I take another hasty swallow from the mug as I follow him, trying to get the liquid level down.

The moment I’m seated on the plush bench, Tristan takes hold of my arm, lifting my wrist so he can see it clearly. The bite mark from yesterday is gone, but there’s still some minor bruising. According to the orientation guidebook, once he’s fed a few times, there will be enough enzymes in my bloodstream that the bruises will fully heal within a few hours.

His fangs slice into me, and I grit my teeth against the pain. The guidebook also said that after a month or so, the enzymes in my bloodstream will deaden the pain of the bite.

I can’t fucking wait for that.

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Chapter 13

I WAIT UNTIL NINE O'CLOCK—AFTER an incredible breakfast that's not ruined by Clive's glaring face, a nap, and the most amazing shower I've ever had—for Cat to call or text me, but she doesn't. That's fucking annoying. I have a list of questions and nobody I can ask for the answers without potentially getting us both into trouble. Although, now that I'm officially Tristan's feeder, would it matter? It's not like we really lied. I *am* a legacy—does the fact that I grew up outside the feeder community matter that much?

Maybe not, but technically I got my registration under false pretences, so it might be better to keep that under my hat for a while.

I heave a huge sigh, staring at the ceiling above the couch in my living room. So… yeah. Until Cat texts me, I'm shit outta luck. I could go over there, but—

The sound of footsteps coming up the stairs breaks into my train of thought.

"Adam?" a voice calls. It's Anna. "Can I come up?"

I push up to a sitting position and call, "Sure." She appears a few seconds later, looking sharp in a tailored black suit, hair slicked back. "Whoa, you look killer."

She glances down at herself and grins. "Thanks. Tristan has people coming for a meeting later this morning, so I need to look intimidating."

Wait, she's Tristan's bodyguard too? The impression I got was that she looks after overall security for Tristan but bodyguards his human employees—like me.

She must see my confusion. “You live in the house now,” she reminds me. “People at the Association know about you, and everyone loves to gossip about Tristan. The news that he’s got a new feeder in the house will have spread through the vampire community.”

Through the *vampire* community? I clear my throat. “Maybe my parents sheltered me too much,” I begin hesitantly, hoping I’m not giving away my secret, “but are you implying that other vampires might…” I trail off at the incredulous look she gives me. “I mean, *of course* other vampires are dangerous,” I backtrack. “I just meant… even here in Tristan’s house?” How can I be in danger from Tristan’s colleagues if I follow all the rules? It’s not like I was planning to walk into the meeting and make myself at home.

“You really are sheltered,” Anna teases, and then her smile disappears. “I know it seems like you should be less at risk because Tristan’s the regent, but it’s actually the opposite. He hasn’t been here all that long, in vampire terms, and there are plenty of them who want things to go back to how they were before.”

I have no idea what any of that means, but I nod. “That makes sense,” I say. “Maybe I spent too much time away from the community.” What the fuck is a regent, and what does it mean that Tristan is one? How were things before?

Anna makes a sympathetic face. “You’ll settle back in fast,” she assures me. “Being hired so quickly after you decided to register probably didn’t help you reacclimatise.”

“Mm. Yeah, I kinda just decided the night before last. I was gonna take a few days to sort it out, but then Cat said Tristan needed a feeder, and it made sense not to wait.”

“We’re glad you didn’t. Tristan hates feeding from temps, which means he doesn’t feed as often, and you know how shitty hungry vampires can get.”

I don’t but also, I really don’t want to. It seems like the kind of thing a smart person avoids. “Heh. Yeah. Happy to help.” I’m starting to think I should have asked a *lot* more questions before I let Cat talk me into this.

“Anyway, I came up to ask if you have some time free. Tristan’s nine thirty call got cancelled, so it would be a good time to talk about security guidelines.”

I was hoping to have more answers before having to tackle this conversation, but I guess that's not going to happen. Standing, I stretch my arms over my head, then pull up my trackies where they've slid down my hips. "I've got nothing on this morning. Let's do it."

She looks me up and down, hesitates, then says, "Tristan's kind of… old-fashioned. Maybe change first?"

I glance down at my clothes. Yeah, I'm wearing tracksuit bottoms and a T-shirt, but they're not rags. They're pretty new and even clean. The T-shirt's from Kmart, sure, but the pants are Adidas. "He was okay with what I wore this morning," I point out. If he can handle me in boxers, this should be fine.

"Yeah, but feeding's different. This is a work meeting. Would you have worn that to a meeting for your old job?"

Well, that's all I need to hear to know Anna's never worked in hospo, because the answer is hell yes, if there were no customers. Though… not at every job I've had. Some of them were stricter. "I don't exactly have business clothes," I protest.

"Just put on jeans and shoes. An outfit you'd wear to leave the house."

I think I'm offended. "This *is* an outfit I'd wear to leave the house," I grumble, but I obediently go into the bedroom and put on my jeans from yesterday and a pair of slides I got half-price at the Puma outlet in DFO. Anna takes one look at them and sighs.

"It's these or rubber thongs," I warn. "I'm not putting on socks and shoes just to go downstairs and talk."

"It's fine. But if you really don't have anything business appropriate, you need to get something." She starts down the stairs, and I follow.

"Why?"

"For when you travel with Tristan. People will see you with him, and you'll need to be dressed appropriately."

For what now? I consciously relax my jaw, mentally consign Cat to the deepest pits of hell, and ask casually, "How often does Tristan travel?"

Anna shrugs as we reach the bottom of the stairs. "It depends on how well everyone's behaving. At least once a month that you'll go with him. Nadia always stayed behind if he was just going for the day—usually Sydney or Hobart—but anything overnight, you have to go too, obviously."

"Obviously," I echo and add a shopping trip to my to-do list. I have black pants that I wore to work at my last job, but they're getting kind of

worn and I don’t think they’ll meet Tristan’s standards. It’s fine. I can grab a couple pairs of dress pants and some shirts, and I’ll be all set. My new wage will more than cover it—I might even splash out and go to the designer floor of Myer.

Anna leads the way into the room next door to Tristan’s office. It’s a dining room, with a long, highly polished table and enough matching chairs with upholstered cushions for twelve people. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a table that big in someone’s home, not with so much space between the chairs. You could probably seat eighteen people if you had to. There’s a sideboard in matching polished wood along the wall beside the fireplace, and opposite are double doors with glass panes that lead into Tristan’s office. They’re closed at the moment, and through them I can see him at his desk, head bent as he writes something with a phone held to his ear. He’s wearing his suit jacket now, unlike earlier. Is that a normal thing people do? I’ve never worked in a corporate office, but I can’t imagine trying to get work done with a jacket on. I always assumed that jackets were for meetings where you want to impress people, and when you’re at your desk, it comes off. Maybe it’s just a Tristan thing. He comes across as the buttoned-up type.

I turn away before I get caught staring and wander over to the bay window at the end of the room. It has the same original leadlight and stained-glass panes that most of the house does.

“This is a nice room.” It is, but mostly I just don’t know what else to say.

Anna chuckles as she pulls out a chair and sits down. I didn’t notice before when I was goggling over the size of the table, but there’s an iPad and a notebook where she’s sitting. I guess she’s more prepared for this meeting than I am.

“Do I need to make notes?” I go to join her at the table, pulling out the chair beside her. Normally I’d leave some room, since it’s not like the room’s gonna fill up, but there’s that much space between the chairs that it would be weird if I did.

“Nah,” Anna says. “I’ll email you anything you need to know. Mostly we’re going to work out scheduling and what your needs outside the house might be.”

That doesn’t sound weird and prison-y *at all*.

The sound of a door opening distracts me, and I look up to see Tristan walking in, his leather-bound notebook or diary or whatever in his hand. Pierce is right behind him, and he smiles at me, flashing fang. How the hell have vampires not been discovered before this? Do they just not smile in public?

“Thank you for making time for this,” Tristan says as they take a seat across from me and Anna, and I nod.

“Oh, uh, sure. Of course. I haven’t exactly worked out how I’m going to fill my days now.” The words hang awkwardly between us, and I wish I could take them back. He doesn’t give a crap about me filling my days. It probably sounded like I was complaining, and how fucking stupid would that be? Complaining about the sweet setup I’ve got here?

“You’ve only just started the job,” Pierce says. “I’m sure you’ll rearrange your life in no time.”

Yeah. Sure. I’m definitely the kind of person who arranges their life, rather than just letting shit happen.

“So the first thing we’ll do is give you access to the house calendar,” he continues. “That might help you sort things out. I put all Tristan’s travel plans there, and I’ll add you to them too so you get a notification and can see what’s coming up.”

“Okay. That sounds good.” It’s a relief that they don’t expect me to keep track of everything in a paper diary. If I can download an app for it on my phone, I’m golden.

“I’ll need your email address,” he prompts, tapping on the screen of a tablet he pulled from… somewhere. His suit jacket, maybe? His suit doesn’t look as stuffy and formal as Tristan’s, but it’s still a fucking suit.

I give him my email. His hand jerks a bit as I say it, and I wince as Anna smothers a laugh. I was thirteen when I set up the account, and thirteen-year-old boys aren’t exactly mature. I should probably set up an account with just my name or something to use for official stuff, but who can be bothered keeping track of more than one email account?

“Thank you,” Pierce says when he looks up, and my phone vibrates in my pocket. “I’ve sent the invite. Feel free to poke around in the calendar. Every entry includes details or links to documents like airline confirmations. You don’t have administrator permission, so you can’t accidentally delete anything.”

“Good, because that’s a nightmare I don’t need unlocked.”

He chuckles, and I make myself relax. This isn't so bad.

"Is there anything I need to be aware of when making travel arrangements?" he adds. "Are you a vegetarian or have any other dietary restrictions?"

"Nope to both." I've been on a plane exactly two times in my life. The first was with my parents on a holiday to Cairns when I was nine, and the second was on a boys' trip to Bali when I was at uni. Both times I ate what I was given by the airline.

Pierce makes a note. "Wonderful. We usually fly charter, but occasionally we need to go commercial. If you have a frequent flyer number, email it to me and I'll make sure it gets added to all your reservations."

"Sure." I don't have one, but it can't hurt to set them up, right? I've heard people talking about points and getting free flights with them. Free anything sounds good to me. Also, charter? Does that mean a private plane?

"That's mostly all from me for now. We can talk about formal events another time."

Formal events? Well, fuck.

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Chapter 14

"Security," Anna declares before I can ask a follow-up question about formal events. Probably a good thing, since I don't think "what the fuck?" is considered appropriate in this kind of workplace setting. Shame. "You have two options. The first is that I or another bodyguard goes with you whenever you leave the house and stays within three metres of you at all times."

Uh, let me think about that… "That's a fuck no." Oops. So much for appropriate workplace language. "What's option two?"

"We track you electronically."

I'm not a fan of that either. "You mean like I share my phone's location with you? I thought you were going to drive me places anyway."

"I am." Gone is the friendly, chatty woman from this morning. This Anna is focused and serious—she kind of looks like she could rip out my spleen with her bare hands if she wanted to. Which is a weird thought, since I don't even know where my spleen is exactly, and ripping out organs with bare hands is impossible.

Right?

"This is an additional precaution," she's saying, and I make myself concentrate before I agree to something without fully understanding it. I've done enough of that lately. "But no, you wouldn't share your phone's location. We'd prefer a tracking chip."

Should I point out what a waste of money it is to buy extra tech to track my phone when it already has that functionality built in? Not to mention there's gotta be a dozen apps that share location that would be cheaper than

a tracking chip. Which sounds made-up. I didn't know those things even existed outside movies. "Is it like an AirTag? Or do you need to, like, put it in the guts of my phone? I'm definitely not okay with anything that's going to void my warranty."

"It's got nothing to do with your phone," she explains patiently. "It goes under your skin—the incision is tiny and only needs a single stitch. It'll be healed in a week, and…"

Whatever she's saying fades away as my mind grapples with *under your skin*, *stitch*, and *healed*. I push back my chair and stand.

"No. Nope. Absolutely not. What the hell? You want to microchip me like a pet?" I pace toward the window, then spin around and glare at them.

"Adam," Anna starts calmly, but Tristan gestures, and she falls silent. I switch my glare to him.

"We spoke about this," he says, his voice low and measured. "Before you signed the contract, I told you that security measures would need to be taken. I'm the regent, Adam, and you make me vulnerable."

Fuck. *Fuck*. I'm being totally screwed over by the things I don't know. How can I respond to that when I don't have all the goddamned facts?

"I didn't think you'd want to do *this*. I'm a human being, not—not cattle you can brand."

He doesn't move, and his expression doesn't change, but somehow he suddenly seems… predatory. I thought vampires only needed to hide their fangs to fit in with humans, but it's possible I was wrong and they're hiding a whole lot more. My mouth goes dry, and my heartbeat picks up.

Tristan's mouth curves upward into a smile, but it's the scariest fucking smile I've ever seen. I take a step backward.

"You forget," he murmurs, "to us, humans *are* cattle."

The table is between me and the door to the hallway. I might be able to get to the doors to his office, but he's closer to them than I am. I'm basically trapped.

Unless I break the window behind me.

I inch back another step, my gaze still locked on his face. I'm scared to look away.

"We're getting off track," Pierce interrupts, his tone soothing. "Adam, we understand that these measures seem invasive to you, but ultimately they're for your protection."

Part of me wants to erupt into hysterical giggles—protection? I've never felt more threatened than I do right now—but I still can't take my eyes off Tristan. Pierce is a vampire too, and Anna's deadly in her own way, but Tristan's the one who poses the danger to me. I want so badly to run, but my feet are glued to the floor. I feel like a little kid again, staring at the wardrobe door, convinced that if I move, a monster will leap out and get me.

And then Tristan relaxes back in his seat, the thick, oppressive tension in the room dissipating. The invisible band around my chest releases, and I take a deep breath. My heart rate begins to slow.

What. The. Fuck.

"Sit down," Tristan orders. "Let's see if we can reach a satisfactory compromise."

I hesitate, because a second ago I would have sworn he was about to kill me. My gaze slides to Anna. Her face is tense but she nods, and after another moment I return to my seat beside her. The table is nearly four feet wide, so that's a decent barrier between me and the vampires.

I hope.

"Anna?" Tristan raises a brow at her.

She clears her throat. "I know this feels invasive," she echoes what Pierce said, "and the tracking chip isn't my preferred option. It would allow us to find you if you were taken, but we don't want you to be taken at all. We don't want anyone to have the opportunity to harm you. That's why I'd rather someone be with you."

I grit my teeth, try to think of a reply that won't piss off anyone—including me—and decide to change tack. "What's the likelihood of someone trying to take me? Is this a precaution, or have Tristan's feeders been threatened in the past?"

Immediately, I know I've made a mistake. The atmosphere changes from wary to oppressive. It's not like before—I don't feel personally threatened—but it's still freaking scary. I shift my attention to Tristan, who's watching me with narrowed eyes.

Fuck. What did I say?

"Wow, your parents really did shelter you," Anna says uncomfortably. "Although… how old are you again?"

For a split second, I consider lying to make myself younger. "Twenty-eight," I admit. There's too much chance of being caught out in a lie.

She purses her lips as though she's doing mental calculations. "You would have been seventeen. I suppose I can understand your family trying to keep it from you." She glances at Tristan, then adds, "The answer to your question is yes."

It takes me a minute to remember what my question was: Have Tristan's feeders been threatened in the past? I might not be the smartest person on the planet, but even I can read between the lines here. Eleven years ago, something bad happened to Tristan's feeder. So bad that it's assumed everyone in the feeder-slash-vampire community would know about it. Maybe I should consider exercising the exit clause in my contract.

All three of them are watching me. I need to say something. "When I was seventeen? I… I think I remember there was something going on. Mum and Dad were kind of edgy for a while. But I never heard the details at the time, and I've been mostly living with humans since, so…"

Tristan's gaze is laser-focused on me, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't believe a word I said, but he doesn't call me out.

"It was a terrible time," Pierce murmurs. "So many executions, and poor Benjamin…"

Executions?

"That's why we're taking every precaution possible to protect you," Anna insists. "Like I said this morning, there are still too many vampires who want things in Australia to go back to how they were before, and Tristan stands in their way."

"Okay," I say finally. "I get it. I really do. But I have friends who don't know anything about vampires, and I don't want to give them up. How do I explain to them why you're tagging along to our group brunch next week?"

"Tell them I'm your new girlfriend," she suggests. "I don't care what they think."

I laugh. "I'm gay. I haven't had a girlfriend since I was sixteen and realised guys were a better fit for me."

Pierce coughs violently, and I realise what I just said. "No pun intended," I add sheepishly. Pretty sure sexual innuendoes are also considered unprofessional.

"We can hire a male bodyguard to pose as your boyfriend," he offers, then glances at Anna. "Can't we?"

"Yeah, but it might just be easier for me to sit at a separate table and pretend not to know him." She frowns. "Your cousin has human friends,

doesn’t she? I’m sure I remember Baz saying something about it. I’ll give him a call and see how he handles it.”

Baz? Wait, does Cat have a bodyguard?

“Good idea,” I manage. “Uh, Cat and I share a friend group, so maybe you and Baz can sit together or something.” Has this Baz guy been there every time I’ve seen Cat for the last six years? Oh my god, was he there the other night? Wouldn’t I have seen him following us home? I’m positive nobody got off the tram with us… maybe. I try to remember, but I don’t usually pay attention to that stuff.

“That would make us stand out less,” Anna agrees, making a note for herself. “Do you have any regular appointments I need to know about?”

I shrug. “Not really.”

“Great. I’d appreciate if you can give me as much notice as possible for when you want to go out, but it’s fine if you can’t. The car has some nonstandard security features that I’ll show you, too, though I’d prefer to drive.”

Control is rapidly slipping out of my hands. “Am I allowed to go running?”

“Of course,” she assures me. “I love to run. We can go whenever you want.”

That’s something, I guess.

“Do you have any martial arts or hand-to-hand fighting experience?”

I shake my head. “No, sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, that just means we don’t have to fix bad habits,” she teases. “I’d like to get you started with self-defence lessons. We’ll also teach you how to use weapons and make sure you’re armed.”

“Weapons? What kind of weapons?” This is starting to freak me out.

“Knives and handguns. Maybe—”

“No.” I hold up my hands. “No, sorry, absolutely not. I don’t believe any person needs a handgun, and I won’t use one.”

Anna looks across the table at Tristan, and I follow her gaze.

“I won’t,” I repeat. “I’ll learn how to use a knife if I have to, but I can’t shoot someone. There has to be another way.”

“Past experience has shown that it takes six to eight rounds directly to the chest to slow a vampire enough for a human to escape,” he says, eyes locked with mine. “In more than seventy-five percent of those cases, the vampire survived. A knife might give you a momentary advantage,

especially if it’s silver, but you won’t get away. So you will learn to use a gun.”

“No.” The word leaves my lips without conscious decision on my part, but even though I’m shaken by his revelation—they don’t die even after eight bullets to the chest?—I don’t want to give in. I’m determined to win *something* today.

“Why don’t we start with self-defence and the knife and go from there?” Anna interjects tactfully.

“You can start with whatever you like, but he *will* be adequately armed,” Tristan orders, then looks at the gold watch on his wrist. “We’re done for today. Misha will be here soon, and I don’t want him to see Adam.”

It says a lot about me—none of it smart—that I instantly want to hang around and meet this Misha person, just to piss Tristan off.

“Definitely not,” Anna agrees. “Come on, Adam, let’s go. Clive baked lamingtons yesterday, and I reckon it’s about time for a coffee break.”

He baked lamingtons? Like… homemade? Any thought of terminating my contract flees from my brain.

“Sounds like a plan.”

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Chapter 15

Turns out, four lamingtons (definitely need to get some gym equipment) and another one of Clive's perfect coffees go a long way toward helping me forget how freaky that meeting was. Sure, Tristan got a bit… intense… but he was trying to protect me from whatever horrible thing happened to his past feeder. Which I really need to find out more about.

Anna's phone rings as we're midway through planning my new workout routine. She seems to think that since I'm going to be up at six to feed Tristan anyway, we should follow it up with a run. The idea of *not* having breakfast and going back to bed for a couple of hours appals me, and I'm making the case for a run at nine or nine thirty, when all the crazy people who exercise before work will be safely at their jobs.

"We'll lose half the day that way," she complains, glancing at her phone. "I need to take this, but we're not done with this conversation."

"Ooh, I love a take-charge woman," I tease. I've pretty much given up on trying to be professional. I just don't have it in me. Thankfully, she doesn't seem to care, rolling her eyes as she gets up from her padded armchair and heads out through the double doors to the patio. The minute she's gone, Clive also stands and, without saying a word to me, strides across the living room and disappears into the butler's pantry. He seems determined to stay pissed at me for forgetting to eat yesterday. Or maybe he just doesn't like me. Whatever, he barely talks to me, and apparently if Anna's not here to be a buffer, he won't even stay in the same room as me.

I heave a huge sigh and wonder how much I care. I probably should make an effort to bond with him, right? But on the flip side, he's gonna

make lamingtons and hash browns and gourmet coffee for me even if he hates me. Does it make me a bad person if I don't want to put in the work to change his mind about me? It's eleven thirty on a weekday and I'm sitting on a cushy sofa in a fucking half turret, eating homemade cake. I can live with someone not liking me.

The question takes up so much of my focus that by the time I notice the sound of raised voices, they're in full flight. I cock my head and try to make out the words, but it's a big house, and if the voices are coming from Tristan's office or the dining room like I think, they've got two closed doors and a corridor to travel down.

But what kind of meeting leads to people yelling at each other? I mean, sure, *I'm* not professional, but Tristan definitely is.

I get up and take a few steps toward the door to the hallway, then stop and glance at the patio through the windows. Anna's still on the phone, pacing back and forth, not looking my way at all. A quick glance toward the butler's pantry shows the door half-closed. I doubt Clive will come out until Anna's back—he's probably standing around in there, staring at the shelves and plotting ways to show how much he disapproves of me without endangering his job.

Quietly, I cross the room and take hold of the doorknob, easing it open so I can peer down the hallway. There's nothing to see. I have a clear view straight up the corridor to the entryway, but whoever's yelling, they're still in one of the rooms. The voices are louder with the door open, but not enough for me to understand what's being said.

With a quick glance over my shoulder to make sure Anna's not coming back yet, I slip through the doorway and pull the door almost all the way closed, then creep forward to the corner where the main corridor meets the one leading to Anna's and Clive's rooms. I'm a lot closer to the dining room now, but I figure the corner will give me some cover if I need to pretend I'm not eavesdropping.

I can hear a little better from here. Not everything, but the occasional word. Hopefully enough to guess what the drama's about and who the drama llama is.

"… imprisoned… suffering…" Ooh, that doesn't sound good. "… refuse… if you don't… regret…" Hang on, was that a threat? I don't know who this guy is, but he must have balls of fucking steel to threaten Tristan.

I lean around the corner a bit more and mentally debate whether it's worth trying to get closer and potentially giving away my nosy habits if someone happens to come out.

"… slaughter and—"

The crash vibrates through the house, startling a tiny yelp from me. What the fuck? That sounded like the time one of my roommates accidentally bashed a cricket bat through a wall—only worse.

The dining room door slams open before I can consider the implications of that thought, and a man flies through the doorway and collides with the wall opposite, then slides to the floor amidst a haze of plaster dust. From this angle, I can't see him clearly, but I have a fucking brilliant view of Tristan storming through the dining room door, his face a mask of cold determination that sends chills down my spine. He reaches down with one hand and grabs the man, hoisting him up… and up…

Slowly, I lean a bit farther out into the corridor. Whatever this scene is, it's so intense that I doubt they'll notice my head and should—

Fuck me, Tristan's holding this guy nearly a foot off the ground! By the *throat*!

Lesson of the day: Vampires are super strong, and they do not fuck around.

"This is the last warning I will give you," Tristan says, his voice low and vicious. "You will go back to whatever hole you crawled out of and cease your idiotic threats, or I will annihilate you. Is that understood?"

The other vampire hisses, a contemptuous sound that makes Tristan fully fucking *growl*. I can see his arm tensing through his suit jacket as he tightens his grip. "I'll rip your throat out right now and save myself the trouble of ever needing to deal with you again," he threatens. "Say you understand."

"Come now, Tristan," another voice says, and my gaze jerks back to the dining room doorway. The vampire standing there is so smoking hot, I think I might have forgotten to breathe for a second. Jesus fucking Christ, I'm not even into blonds usually, but if this guy wasn't undead or whatever, I'd be inviting him upstairs in a heartbeat. "There's no need for such an overreaction." He dusts some specks of plaster off the front of his vintage Nirvana T-shirt, and I wonder if vampires trawl through op shops like the rest of us, or if he's just older than he looks and actually bought the thing at a concert.

“Your opinion has not been asked for, Misha.” Tristan doesn’t take his eyes off the vampire he’s choking.

Blondie—Misha—sniffs. “How rude.”

“You’re already on shaky ground for bringing him here. Do *not* push your luck.” The vampire he’s holding makes a snarling sound, but Tristan doesn’t flinch.

Misha, on the other hand, scoffs. “Put him down, will you? You’ve made your point.”

“Not until he acknowledges it. Hurry up, Geoffrey, before I get impatient and use your spinal fluid to fertilise my camellias.”

I flinch at the implication—for some reason, ripping out a spine is scarier than ripping out a throat—and Misha’s head turns toward me. His eyes, so blue I want to believe they’re contacts, lock onto mine, and a smile spreads slowly across his face.

“Well, well. Who’s this little bird? Have you finally found a new feeder, Tristan? He’s not your usual type. Very…” His gaze slides over the parts of me that he can see, and I’m suddenly grateful that the wall exists, both to hide me and to support me. “… grotty.”

“Hey, fuck you,” I snap, the insult shattering my common sense. “I showered this morning.”

“Pierce!” Tristan snarls, not looking my way, and Misha stumbles forward, half turning to glare over his shoulder as Pierce comes out of the dining room.

“Watch yourself, puppy,” he warns, and Pierce’s jaw clenches, but he doesn’t reply, striding quickly toward me and blocking me from Misha’s view.

“Get back in there,” he hisses, jerking his head toward the living room, and for once in my life I decide not to argue. If ever there’s a time to do the smart thing, it’s probably now. I push off the wall and turn toward the door, Pierce crowding behind me the whole way but never quite touching me.

As I reach the doorway, Misha calls, “Bye-bye, little bird. See you again soon.”

I falter, and Pierce murmurs, “Ignore him. Move.” He follows me in, looks around, notes Anna is outside, and barks, “Clive!”

The sound of a cupboard slamming closed precedes hurried footsteps, and then Clive appears around the corner from the kitchen. He takes one glance at me, then at Pierce’s face, and blanches.

“Keep him here,” Pierce orders before disappearing back into the corridor and firmly closing the door behind him.

“What did you do?” Clive hisses, hustling toward me and grabbing me by the arm. He drags me further into the room, well away from the door, and then lets me go.

“Nothing,” I say, then wince. “I eavesdropped, that’s all. I didn’t think they’d see me.”

“Who saw you? Pierce?” He wrings his hands together. Either I misjudged Clive and he hates me less than I thought, or I seriously, *seriously* fucked up.

“And that Misha guy.”

He flinches. Okay, so I might have fucked up.

“What’s the big deal? People are going to find out that Tristan has a feeder. I have to travel with him, and Pierce was talking about formal dinners.” It’s not like they’re planning to keep me locked away from prying eyes.

Clive sucks a deep breath in through his nose, but before he can let loose with whatever verbal barrage he has planned, the glass door to the patio opens, and Anna walks in. She makes it three steps before sensing the tension.

“What happened?” Her eyes flit from Clive to me and back again. “You said you’d try to tolerate him.”

My brain takes a second to realise what that means. “Hey! Tolerate me? I’m better than tolerable!”

They ignore my outburst, Clive jabbing a finger at me as he tells her, “He went out there to eavesdrop and Misha saw him.”

“Fuck,” Anna mutters. She comes toward me. “Are you okay?”

I blink. “I’m fine. I wasn’t anywhere near them.”

“Now do you see why his presence here concerns me?” Clive asks. “He’s a danger to us all.”

That’s not fair. “I haven’t done anything to you, mate,” I snap, planting my hands on my hips. “The only thing I’m a danger to is a decent meal, and I haven’t done anything wrong.”

His eyes narrow, and he opens his mouth—likely to say something nasty—but Anna interrupts. “Clive, now’s not the time. Why don’t you get started on lunch or something?”

He doesn’t look happy about it, but he nods and stomps off into the kitchen. I flip the bird at his back, wishing he’d turn around to see it. Then he might actually have something to bitch about.

Anna grabs my arm and tows me over to the half turret, which is as far from the kitchen as we can get without leaving the room. The remains of our coffee break are still there, and it seems weird to think that was just a few minutes ago. It feels like forever.

“Sit,” Anna orders, pushing me into one of the chairs and perching on the coffee table facing me. “What happened? Don’t leave anything out.”

I sigh, but this is starting to get freaky. Everyone is way more unsettled by this than the situation seems to call for. “I heard yelling,” I report, then explain in excruciating detail—her idea, not mine—every step of my thought process between that moment and Pierce chivvying me back inside.

She’s quiet for a moment, then takes a deep breath. That seems to happen a lot around here. “You *spoke* to Misha.”

“Barely. Why, is he a snob about shit like that?” Did I just break another vampire rule I didn’t know about? Cat would have mentioned if I couldn’t talk to other vampires, right? She told me not to touch them.

Anna doesn’t answer. I don’t even know if she heard me. “And he threatened you?”

Uh… no? “He called me a grotty bird and said he’d see me soon. I don’t think that counts as a threat.”

The door to the corridor opens, and we jerk around to watch as Tristan stalks into the room, followed closely by Pierce. Tristan’s gaze locks onto me and, proving that vampire hearing is epic, says, “It definitely counts as a threat.”

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Chapter 16

Anna stands, and I also get to my feet, not wanting to face an angry vampire sitting down. Not that it would make much difference, given what I just saw. If Tristan can throw around another vampire like that, I'm not going to stand a chance.

"I didn't do anything wrong," I declare, deciding that offence is the best defence. "Nobody said I wasn't allowed to exist in this house."

His nostrils flare in a way I recognise. Lots of people have looked at me that way before, usually when they were on the verge of losing their shit.

"Were you, or were you not, present earlier when I said I didn't want Misha to see you?"

Oh. That. Oops. I open my mouth, but he holds up his hand.

"Regardless of what you might think—if you think at all—I don't imagine myself in the role of a despot, giving orders simply for the sake of it. If I tell you to remain unseen, there is a reason, and I expect you to listen." His voice doesn't rise, not even a tiny bit, but it slices like a knife.

"He wouldn't have seen me if you hadn't thrown the other guy"—I cast around for his name—"Geoffrey, through the door!"

Clive *gasps*, like I've said something that crosses a line, but it's true. I've never let any of my bosses talk to me like I'm an idiot, and I'm not going to start now.

"Oh? I find that hard to believe, since we eventually would have left that room anyway, and you were loitering in the hallway."

"I was mostly hidden by the wall!"

"You shouldn't have been there at all."

I roll my eyes, pretty confident now that he's not going to physically harm me. "Look, I know I shouldn't have been eavesdropping, and I'm sorry about that. I got curious when I heard the yelling, because you do not seem like a guy who yells in meetings. But let's not blow it out of proportion."

Anna flinches.

"Out of proportion?" Tristan repeats, his eyes narrowing.

"Yeah. No real harm was done. You had Geoffrey in a tight grip, and Misha seemed to be more about nasty words than anything else, so…" I shrug, then immediately rethink my whole life when Pierce buries his face in his hands.

Tristan's gimlet gaze bores into me. "If you cannot be trusted to consider your own safety, I will have you locked up when necessary. Don't disobey me again. Is that understood?"

The words bring the memory of Geoffrey being choked flooding into my mind's eye, and I nod. "Now that I know how important it is to you, I'll make sure I stay out of sight when you tell me to." My phone vibrates in my pocket, but even though I could desperately use Cat's insight on this situation, it doesn't seem like the right time to check it.

Tristan looks like he wants to say more, but after a long moment, he turns away, telling Clive, "Some repairs are needed. Please organise it immediately."

Clive's jaw drops open. "You're letting him stay?"

What the fuck? Why does he sound pissed about that? I glare at him.

Tristan raises a brow, and Clive's cheeks flush. "I'll arrange for the workmen to come today," he mumbles, and then Tristan's sweeping out of the room, Pierce on his heels. Anna drops back to sitting on the coffee table, exhaling loudly, but I'm not done with Clive.

"Mate, you got a problem with me? Because we don't have to be besties, but I'm not okay with you telling the boss he should sack me."

Clive whirls on me. "Of course I have a problem with you!" he shouts, eyes blazing, and I take a step back. "You have no respect for Tristan or the position you hold! You've been here less than one full day, and all you've done is cause trouble."

"Fuck you, I have not!" Although… "Not deliberately," I add. He's kind of right, what with not eating yesterday and today's debacle. Has it really only been less than a day?

He scoffs and turns his back on me. “It’s always ‘not deliberately’ with people like you. You hurtle through life like a wrecking ball, causing destruction everywhere you go, and people let you get away with it because you’re *you*.”

I’m not sure what he means by that, but based on the way Anna grabs my wrist and gives me a pleading look, I’m better off letting it go this time. Besides, I don’t know that I’m capable of winning an argument with someone who uses “hurtle” in a sentence.

Time for a tactical retreat.

“I’m going upstairs. Someone call me when lunch is ready.” I’m not making the same mistake again today.

“Thank you,” Anna mouths, letting me go. Clive says nothing, already banging around in the kitchen. I might have to ask him to taste my food before I eat it, just to make sure it’s not poisoned.

The corridor is a mess of plaster dust and shards, with a man-sized impact crater on the staircase wall. I peek into the dining room and see a similar one on the wall beside the door. The door also looks a bit crooked—Clive might need to get the tradies to rehang it. Tristan might look buttoned-up and rigid, but he’s definitely capable of doing a lot of damage when he’s riled.

I pull out my phone as I jog up the stairs and see a missed call and a voicemail message from Cat. Fucking finally! It takes me a few seconds to find my earbuds—still not sure *how* good vampire hearing is, but I know it’s good—and then I play the message.

“God, Adz, I’m so sorry!” Her hushed whisper fills my ears, and even though I don’t know what she’s about to say, my stomach sinks. “One of Nisha’s companies in New Delhi had an emergency, and we left last night. I was going to call you as soon as we got off the plane, but I forgot my charger and my phone was dead. I’m so sorry. I can’t really talk right now, but we should be back by Monday. Text me if anything urgent comes up, and just try not to make waves. I’m sorry.”

I stare at my phone as the message ends. Seriously? Try not to make waves? A bit fucking late for that.

Though that’s not Cat’s fault. I might try to find a way to blame her for it, but my actions are not on her. I’m a grown adult.

Still, what the fuck am I supposed to do now? Texting isn’t going to cut it, not with the long list of questions I have, and if she can’t talk, it’s not

likely that she's going to be able to send detailed texts. Monday is four days away. As Clive pointed out, a fuck ton of shit has happened in the last twenty-four hours. Can I safely go another four days without a guardrail?

But what other option do I have? It's not like I know a ton of people who are part of the vampire community *and* who know that I'm new to it. Aside from Cat, I've never even spoken to the vampire feeder members of my extended family.

Maybe Cat's right, and I just need to sit tight and not make waves.



WHEN I KNOCK on Tristan's part-open office door that evening, he's standing by the window, staring out into the dark garden. Can he even see anything out there with the light reflecting off the glass? Is this a vampire thing?

He turns as I close the door behind me, his gaze taking me in, but says nothing. I wish it was easier to tell what he's thinking. Is he still annoyed about this morning?

"Hi," I say. "How's your day been?"

It was the wrong thing to say, I know instantly from the way his mouth presses into a line. So I follow it up with, "Are you hungry?"

Seriously, what the fuck is wrong with me? Who asks a vampire if they're hungry?

On the plus side, the angry mouth line relaxes, and he shakes his head slightly, turning back to the window to close the blinds. Yay. I really don't like the idea of having a dark window behind me while a vampire sucks my blood.

He sits on the upholstered bench, and I cross the room and sit beside him. I wonder if he prefers to feed in his office to keep things on a professional basis between us. Cat said something about feeding being intimate, and it really is. Does Tristan not like the idea of work friends? Or does he think I might get delusions of something else?

Never gonna happen. The thought of sex with a vampire makes my balls draw up and my dick want to fall off. Potential death has never been a turn-on for me. Maybe if I tell him that, he'll relax a bit and we can build a better boss-employee relationship.

Not right now, though. He's about to bite me, and just in case this is something that will piss him off, I'd rather wait.

I extend my arm in the way that's already starting to feel familiar, and as he bites, I study the top of his head, blocking out the sharp pain. His curls are slightly mussed, and weirdly, my fingers itch to smooth them down. That would *not* be a good idea, especially after the way I've already pushed boundaries today.

As he continues to feed, I relax. This isn't so bad. It's only my second day on the job, and already I can say it's better than any other job I've had. There have been a few hiccups, sure, but I'll work around them. The gossip is for sure better than I thought it would be—I've worked places where fights broke out on the regular, but never where the boss threw someone into a wall. Multiple walls.

Okay, new plan, since I don't want to lose this job. I keep my head down and stick to my room as much as possible for the next few days, then corner Cat when she gets back and find out everything I don't know.

I might also need to keep my mouth shut until then. That's going to be harder, since running my trap is kind of my special talent, but hey, I can make sacrifices to get ahead. It'll be like Tara putting in a stupid number of extra hours at the law firm, except I just need to keep my lips zipped until I can be sure I'm not giving anything away.

Tristan's tongue laves my wrist, and I startle. Is he finished already? I got lost in my thoughts—not something I can say too often.

His dark eyes rise to study my face. "All right?"

I nod. "Yeah, sorry. I was thinking and lost track of time."

He makes a sound of acknowledgement and releases my wrist, but before I can get up, he puts a hand on my shoulder to keep me in place.

"How do you feel? Any light-headedness?"

"No." I shake my head. "I ate today. I promise that won't ever happen again."

He hesitates, his fingertips brushing my throat, and I realise he's checking my pulse. Wow, I mess up one time, and nobody wants to trust me anymore. Eventually, he stands and moves away, his hand sliding from my shoulder.

"I wonder if I could ask a favour of you," he says as he heads toward his desk.

A favour? Not what I was expecting him to say. "Uh, sure. What's up?"

He picks up a pen and twiddles it between his fingers. “I understand that Clive hasn’t been very welcoming to you.”

Oh, crap. Am I supposed to agree? It’s true, but that feels a lot like dobbing. “Not sure where you got that idea,” I say finally, even though we both know he heard Clive yelling at me earlier. Vampire hearing, man. It’s bullshit.

His mouth twitches. Was that… a smile? No way.

“I ask that you give him some time to adjust and show patience in the meanwhile. I appreciate your restraint this morning.”

I am so fucking confused. “Sure. I mean, he doesn’t have to like me. We can get along when we have to.” I hope.

Tristan nods. “Thank you. I believe your dinner is ready.”

That’s a dismissal if ever I’ve heard one, so I make for the door, still trying to work out what the hell just happened.

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Chapter 17

Anna puts the car in park, and I have my seat belt off and door open before she can turn off the engine.

"Thank you! Pick me up in three hours?" I feel like a total prick saying it, and her arrested expression reveals she wasn't expecting to hear it, but there is zero chance of me letting her come inside with me. *Zero*.

I don't give her time to suggest that she could, closing the door and waving cheerily as I head up the front path. This next part is tricky, since I know she won't drive off until I'm safely inside, and that gives her too much time to decide that maybe she should ask if she can come in. I *really* don't want to have to say no to her face, but I won't have any other option. She can't meet my parents.

Luckily, I still have my key to the house. My parents didn't ask for it back when I moved out, and I'm too lazy to have ever taken it off the keyring. It's in my hand as I approach the door, and I'm inside within seconds. I hear the car driving off as I close the door behind me.

"It's me," I call, then remember how long it's been since I visited and add, "Adam."

There's a shocked silence before I hear the scrape of a chair against the floor and Mum calls, "Adam?"

She appears in the kitchen doorway as I walk down the corridor, her eyes wide with surprise that's quickly replaced by a worried frown. "Has something happened? Are you okay?"

There's probably a message in the fact that I visit so infrequently that her first thought is that something's wrong. The more important message,

though, is that she's right. I lasted less than a day before I decided I needed answers sooner than I'd be able to get them from Cat. Who else did I know who was familiar with the vampire-slash-feeder world *and* knew that I hadn't grown up in it? My parents, that's who. So I launched a cunning plan. Phase one: Tell Anna I wanted to visit them. Phase two: Make sure my dad's taken his blood pressure medication. Phase three: Tell them what I've been up to this week and ask a million questions.

It's foolproof. Absolutely cannot fail.

"Hi, Mum." I smile as I reach her, bending my head to drop a kiss on her cheek. "Dad here?"

I know he will be. My parents are creatures of habit, and it's Saturday. On Saturday mornings, they like to sleep late, then linger over brunch while they catch each other up on how their weeks have been. They both work stupidly long hours during the week, plus they have separate hobbies and friends they like to spend time with, but they've always reserved Saturday for spending time together. I've never been able to decide if it's a sign of a healthy marriage or not.

"I'm here," Dad says as I step past Mum. He's sitting at the kitchen table, a mug of coffee in front of him, wearing the same concerned frown as Mum. "Were we expecting you today?"

"Nope." I've already had two cups of coffee this morning, so I grab a glass from the cupboard over the sink and help myself to the bottle of juice on the table instead, sliding into a chair across from Dad as I do.

He and Mum exchange a glance as she retakes her seat. "It's good to see you," she offers. "How have things been?"

Ah, the perfect opening.

"Well, I lost my job on Tuesday," I begin, but don't give them time to say anything before continuing, "It's okay, though, because Cat—you remember me telling you about Cat, right? Catrina Barale, my cousin?"

They exchange another glance, and this time they both look a little unsteady. Dad takes a big gulp of coffee.

"Anyway, Cat said she had an idea for a job for me, and then she told me—"

"You can't believe anything she said," Mum breaks in. "There's a reason we don't have contact with those people, Adam. They—"

"It's too late, Mum." I push up the sleeve of my hoodie and show them my wrist. It's nearly healed from this morning's feeding, but there's a trace

of a bruise and the faintest impression of fangs still remaining. Most people wouldn't have a clue what it meant, but for someone in the know, the signs are unmistakable.

Mum sucks in a breath, and Dad closes his eyes, shaking his head slightly.

"We wanted you to have a real life. A *safe* life, away from all that," he says bitterly. "We wanted you to have options we didn't."

"Look, no judgment here, because I'm still getting my head around everything, but it seems to me you had plenty of options. Neither of you were ever feeders, right?" Fuck, were they? Did they walk away before that even came up, or after?

"That's not the point," Mum protests. "You don't know what it was like to grow up being told that my value would be in letting some predator siphon away my life."

Whoa. Okay, a lot to unpack there. That's not at all the vibe I get from Cat about her upbringing. Was Mum's family different?

"Your mother's right. There was a constant refrain of how privileged I was to be a Barale, to be so favoured by vampires. Even from people our age in other feeder families. Nobody saw us for who we were—it was always our existence as legacies. What twelve-year-old wants to be told he's lucky, that his family name means a vampire will pick him as soon as he registers?"

I sip my juice, thinking about how to handle this. They're not wrong. It's fucked-up to the extreme that anyone thinks that way about kids. But that's also not the point of my visit.

"I'm not the person to have that conversation with you, because I wasn't there and I don't know what it was like," I say finally. "You got away and built a good life anyway, and I'm glad for you."

Mum eyes me. "You're not angry?"

I shrug. "About what? That you didn't stay somewhere you were unhappy to do something you hated? That would make me an arsehole, Mum. You had the right to make your own choices."

They look at each other again. I'm getting a bit sick of that. They should talk with their words, not their eyes. "Some might argue that we took away your choice."

"Some would be… okay, they wouldn't be *wrong*, exactly. I get why you didn't want me to grow up in that environment, but why didn't you tell

me anything about it? You know how aimless I've been since finishing uni, and how many jobs I've run through. Didn't you think I might like to make that kind of money?"

Dad frowns. "We *thought* you'd use your education to get a decent job. Either of us could have gotten you—"

I wave him off. "I'm not interested in working at a bank or in financial planning. We've been over that. Stick to the point."

He grumbles something under his breath, then admits, "We'd always planned to tell you when you were a teenager. Before you went to uni. We figured that you could consider it like any other career path that would come after university, and without the brainwashing of being raised around feeders."

I blink, taken aback. "So what changed your mind?"

Mum sighs. "We don't have contact with anyone in the feeder community, but we still have access to the Dish. We were logging in and checking on the latest news every month until… well, until we decided not to tell you."

The… dish? How is it possible that I came here to get answers to my questions and instead have more questions?

Dad picks up the story. "Not long before you graduated high school, there was an… incident. A tragedy. The regent's feeder was kidnapped, tortured, and killed." He shakes his head as a shiver of déjà vu travels down my spine. This is what I heard about the other day—Tristan's feeder who was used against him. The reason he's so strict about security for his feeders. "After that, we changed our minds about telling you. We didn't want you anywhere near that world."

Yeah… I have a feeling my part of this story isn't going to go down well with them.

I choose my words carefully. "That's understandable. I mean that. I genuinely understand why you made the decisions that led to this."

"Thank you." Mum reaches over to pat my hand. "I… Please don't take this the wrong way, but is it too late for you to change your mind? It's only been a few days since you found out, you said. Do you have a contract…?" The hope in her eyes makes me feel guilty that I'm about to destroy it.

"I do have a contract—"

"But there has to be a cooling-off clause," Dad interrupts. "I never actually saw a feeder contract, but I remember hearing about feeders and

vampires who walked away within the first month or so due to incompatibility. It's not too late."

Hoo boy. "I'm not walking away from my contract," I tell them firmly. "There have been some teething issues, but there's an easy fix for that, and it's why I've come here."

"But—"

"No, Mum. I'm sorry if this upsets you, but I'm not leaving this job. I've got housing, full board, limited work hours, a killer wage, and time to consider what I want from my life. If I can stick this out for a year or even two, I'll be in a different financial position and I might have a better idea of what I want to do next."

They stare at me in disappointed silence for so long that it starts to get awkward, and then finally Dad sighs. "Only you would pick *this* to make a rational life choice about," he mutters. "Fine." He turns to Mum and assures her, "It's not so bad. Vampires have always been protective of their staff, and it's not as though he's the regent's feeder. I doubt anyone would have much to gain by targeting him."

I look down at the table so they don't see me wince. Maybe I'll wait to mention that little titbit.

"I guess so," Mum concedes. "And maybe after a year, you'll be ready for a different job. I can get you an interview at my firm anytime." Her voice brightens on the words.

Mum's a partner in a big firm of financial advisers and planners, and I can't think of much worse than having to wear a suit to work every day and be polite to clients, but hey, compromise is important. "Maybe."

That perks them both up. "You mentioned teething problems," Dad says. "What are they, and how can we help?"

I grimace. "Cat's boss had an acquaintance who was looking for a feeder, and I needed a new job fast, so we fudged things a bit and didn't tell anyone that I wasn't raised in the community. The vampires heard the name Barale and made the assumptions we wanted them to, and since I already had a contract waiting, the Association didn't look into it either."

"So you don't have some of the background information you need," Dad realises. "But isn't Cat helping you?"

I nod. "That was the plan, but Wednesday night—my first night on the job—her boss had to go to India for some business emergency, and Cat can't get enough private time to call me. She won't be back until Monday,

and I thought I could manage, but I've already nearly slipped up a few times."

"You want us to teach you a lifetime's worth of knowledge about vampires and feeders in one day?" Mum asks in dismay.

I glance at the clock on the wall. "We actually only have two and a half hours before I get picked up." Scratching my head, I suggest, "It'll have to be the short version."

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Chapter 18

The look Mum gives me reminds me of when I was in primary school and once told her it was okay that I hadn't done my book report presentation because the book was boring anyway and none of my classmates needed to hear about it.

"You want the 'short version' of more than six hundred years' worth of history and traditions?" She even makes air quotes. My mother's always been an expert at making me feel like an idiot.

But… "I probably don't need much of the history right away. It's the day-to-day stuff that's tripping me up. Like, who is the regent? What does he do?"

"He's in charge," Dad says dismissively. "You probably won't ever have to meet him, so we can put that on the list of things to talk about another time, along with history. Let's cover the stuff you'll actually need first."

Fuck. I scratch my jaw and look away. "Yeah, about that…"

"Adam?" Mum's voice takes on a tone that means I'm very close to getting grounded. I don't think she can still ground me since I'm twenty-eight and contracted to a vampire, but I bet she'd probably try. "Is your vampire a friend of Tristan's?"

For a split second, I wonder if I can get away with saying, "Who's Tristan?" They obviously know he's the regent, which is great because they can tell me what that fucking means. In charge? In charge of what? But I've just finished calming their fears about me being in danger, and telling them I'm employed by the vampire whose feeder being killed sparked off those fears is probably not going to help this situation.

Ugh. I hate when things don’t go my way.

“Not exactly,” I stall.

“What’s that mean?” Dad asks. “Are they business acquaintances?”

“Does it matter? The relevant thing is, I need to know what the regent does.”

Mum folds her arms across her chest and stares me down, Dad shaking his head as if he can’t believe I said that. He’s got a point. “Why?” has always been the first thing Mum asks when I tell her I need something. I’m not going to win this battle.

Sighing, I slump forward and prop my chin on my fists. “Okay, fine. Tristan’s my vampire. But you don’t need to worry, because ever since everything happened to Benjamin—which, by the way, I need to know the details about that—anyway, since then, he’s gotten freakishly paranoid about his feeders. Anna’s my full-time bodyguard, and she’s teaching me self-defence. They even want to give me weapons.” I add the last bit in a joking tone, but nobody laughs or makes a joke about what a bad idea it would be to arm me. Mum looks like she wants to cry, and Dad’s jaw is tightly clenched.

I don’t know what to say, and once again the silence draws out until I’m fidgeting in my chair. Finally, Dad sucks in a breath through his nose.

“Are you sure we can’t talk you into leaving this job?”

“I’m sure,” I say, even though part of me is wondering if that’s the right decision.

He nods. “If you change your mind, just say the word. We’ll do whatever it takes to get you out of there.”

I may have misjudged my parents all these years. “Thank you. But I’m determined to stick this out for at least a year.”

Neither of them looks happy about that. It’s ironic, because they’ve lectured me countless times in the past about how I need to stop playing musical jobs.

“Vampire hierarchy is based on age and viciousness,” Mum starts, not meeting my gaze. “Those go hand in hand, because the older a vampire is, the more powerful they are. They’ve never said why that is, as far as I know, but the feeder theory is that the virus in their blood mutates over time. The older ones need to feed less, which implies that whatever it is that heals them and keeps them from aging uses less blood to do so the longer they’ve been a vampire.”

That’s not exactly what I’ve asked, but it raises another question. “Cat said there aren’t many new vampires these days but that when there are, they’re desperate to feed. Does that mean they feed more than twice a day?”

“New vampires feed constantly for the first few months, and they do so chained up under the supervision of older vampires.” Dad shakes his head. “They’re unstable and not able to control themselves. It takes months, sometimes years, before they can be trusted around humans. Unless something happened in the past ten years, there hasn’t been a new vampire since you were a toddler.”

“Modern technology makes the risk of discovery hard enough,” Mum interjects, “without adding the insanity of new vampires to that. The Council put a death sentence on the creation of new vampires without explicit permission.”

So. Many. Questions. I glance at the clock and decide to stick to the most relevant ones. “The Council?”

“About three hundred years ago, people began to push back against vampires. Things were getting out of control in the Balkans and up through the Carpathian Mountains—vampires were going pretty much unchecked, to the point that governments were actually beginning to listen to the tales of panicked villagers. There was talk of armies being mobilised.”

“Really? They were going to send the army in to hunt vampires?” How come I never got taught that in any history class?

Dad shakes his head. “I don’t think anyone believed vampires existed, but given the increased death rate, they knew something was going on. The rationale behind sending troops was likely to calm people down while they investigated the cause of the problem.”

“But it was enough for some of the older vampires to take action,” Mum continues. “Vampires were all loners back then, mostly forced to stay indoors during the day to avoid the sun’s damaging rays. Even if they’d all banded together—which was never going to happen—they would still have been outnumbered by an army with cannons and guns that could do significant damage to them. *And* they would have been vulnerable during the day, basically trapped unless they could be sure of a blood source. They wanted to avoid that, so they started cleaning up after the problematic vampires.”

“That’s a nice way of saying they executed them,” Dad explains. “Six of the oldest, most powerful vampires alive took their nests and systematically

hunted and killed the vampires that were causing the most trouble, and while they were at it, they bullied and threatened every other vampire they came across. They called it the Cleansing. When it was over and things had calmed down enough that the governments were focused on other things, those vampires decreed that they were the ruling Council and all vampires answered to them."

"Ballsy. The other vampires were okay with that?"

Mum snorts. "No. They spent the next fifty or so years executing any vampire that defied them. They still do, but there aren't as many who bother anymore. Vampires have it good now, with their own personal cattle." Her bitterness is clear, but I ignore it. I don't want to have that argument with her again.

"When did feeders come into it?"

"During the Cleansing," Dad says. "It was one of the things they did to try to escape the notice of governments. Vampires were ordered not to kill while feeding, and then to offer humans money in exchange for feeding from them. The Council wanted the humans who were being fed from to have a vested interest in keeping their secret, unlike humans who were unwilling."

That's unhinged. "And then over time that became more organised?"

"Yes. There were many reports of humans who'd been taken unwillingly and then had money thrown at them afterward, and that wasn't what the Council wanted, so they stopped leaving it up to individual vampires and started implementing rules. The Association came into existence about a hundred years later, but it existed unofficially for decades before that."

"So is a regent a member of the Council?"

"No, members of the Council are councillors," Mum corrects. "In the late eighteenth century, they got bored with running all over Europe to kill rule breakers. They set up local governments, each one headed by a regent. The regent basically acts as the voice of the Council."

"Oh." *Oh. Fuck.* I somehow got tied to the local boss vampire? "But why is Tristan based here in Melbourne instead of Canberra? That's the capital of Australia." It comes out on a whine, and Dad rolls his eyes.

"I doubt Tristan cares where the capital is. When I was a kid, he lived in Sydney. That's part of the reason we moved here, but then he moved too, shortly after you were born."

I frown. “Why would he move the whole government?”

“He doesn’t age, Adam,” Mum says, exasperated. “Vampires tend to move around every few decades to prevent people from noticing them. It’s easier in big cities, but they can’t just live in the same house forever.”

That’s a good point. “Okay, so he’s the boss here in Australia?”

“Australia, Aotearoa, and the Pacific Islands,” Dad corrects. “We used to all be under the aegis of the South-East Asian regent, but after the federation of Australia, the Council took note that we actually had a vampire population and split the regions. Tristan was sent over from England even though he was only a hundred and three at the time.”

I’m not touching that number just yet, although it’s definitely going to warrant a breakdown later. “Wait, vampires are gross colonisers too? Seriously?”

Mum pinches the bridge of her nose. “What?”

“Why didn’t the Council pick a local vampire to be the regent?”

“Because the local vampires were running riot,” she explains patiently. “They were going into Aboriginal communities and trying to recruit feeders, and when they were declined, they took feeders by force.”

“They even made some into vampires against their will,” Dad adds. “Their behaviour was the whole reason the Council noticed that there were vampires living here.”

“Sure, but why wasn’t one of the Aboriginal vampires offered the position of regent?”

“They were *new vampires*, Adam. They weren’t even capable of looking at humans without descending into bloodlust, never mind governing.”

“Well, what about—”

“Adam, vampirism originated from the Black Death, which happened in Europe. To the best of anyone’s knowledge, there were no vampires outside of Europe until European vampires started travelling and made them. Do you know how long it took by ship to get to Australia from Europe back then? Vampires didn’t like travelling by ship for months on end, so they weren’t coming to this part of the world. There were no indigenous vampires in the region who wanted the job—most of them didn’t even want to be vampires—and even if there had been, they likely wouldn’t have had the strength to stand against the troublemakers.”

“Oh.” It still seems gross to me, but I guess there might be context.

Dad continues, “Tristan had been working for the Council for decades, and he had a reputation for ruthlessness that they thought would be necessary here.”

Tristan? Ruthless? He’s so soft-spoken and genteel in his ridiculously tailored suits. Although he did seem pretty ruthless when he was throwing Geoffrey against several walls.

Speaking of… “Tristan had a meeting the other day with two vampires, and it didn’t go well. What are the chances that you could tell me about them?”

They exchange a glance. “It depends,” Dad says slowly. “We don’t know every vampire in Australia. Especially the ones here in Melbourne, since we’ve made an effort to stay out of the community.”

“You should stay out of Tristan’s business,” Mum tacks on. “Don’t get involved in anything you don’t have to.”

Yeahhhh… might be a bit late for that. “But if I tell you their names and you recognise them, can you tell me about them?”

“It’s too much to hope that you’d ever learn to listen, isn’t it?” Mum says sarcastically. “Fine. Who were they?”

“One was called Geoffrey—”

“Geoffrey?” Dad interrupts, surprised. “What did he look like?”

Huh. I guess I was so busy concentrating on the fragments of wall and Tristan’s epic strength that I didn’t pay that much attention to the man he was beating up. “Uh, brown hair. Kind of mousey? He was about my height.” I think. It was hard to tell with him dangling in the air. “He looked like he was my age too.” Though that doesn’t mean anything, with the whole not-aging thing.

They exchange another glance. “That sounds like him,” Mum murmurs, and Dad nods.

“Like who?” Seriously, they’re gonna be cryptic now?

“The newest vampire. The one who was made when you were little.”

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Chapter 19

"What? That happened *here*? Not in Europe somewhere?"

"It happened here," Mum confirms. "From what we read on the Dish—"

"Hold on, sorry, wait. You mentioned that before but didn't say what it is."

"What? The Dish?"

"Yeah. What the hell is it?"

"You need to be on there," Dad says. "Cat can probably get you set up with the family account, but in the meantime, I'll give you my login to use."

"Great, thanks, but what is it?"

"It's an online forum for feeders and other humans who know about vampires. Some vampires are on there, too, but they mostly stick to their own boards. Your father and I used it to keep on top of all the news after we left."

My mouth is hanging open. A motherfucking *forum*? Like a vampire Reddit? That would have been a fucking goldmine for me these past few days. Cat and I are gonna have words. "That would be great. Please and thank you."

Dad stands and heads for the door, saying over his shoulder, "I'll get the laptop and show you before you go."

I turn back to Mum. "What did you read on the Dish about Geoffrey?" I mentally cross my fingers that it's something that will give me insight into what happened the other day.

"It wasn't nice," she says, shaking her head, and that doesn't surprise me. The guy must be a real wanker to have pissed Tristan off like that. "The

regent tried to keep most of the details under wraps, but it was too juicy not to leak. There was a group of vampires, maybe a dozen, most of whom had been here before Tristan was appointed and weren't happy with the changes he'd made. They—"

"Sorry, quick tangent. What changes did he make?"

Mum gives me an impatient "pay attention" look. "He stopped them from making new vampires without consent," she reminds me. "He also cracked down hard on vampires who were abusing their feeders or assaulting random humans and mind-wiping them. A lot of vampires were executed after he arrived, but there were some he couldn't get enough evidence on. They weren't happy about it, but they toed the line publicly."

"Publicly," I repeat, and she shrugs.

"It was pretty much an open secret that they were behind some of the atrocities that would occasionally happen. Tristan couldn't ever prove it, but everyone knew. They defied him every chance they got."

"And these are the vampires who made Geoffrey?"

She nods, just as Dad comes back in, laptop in hand. "He was a random human they'd picked up somewhere and convinced that it was an honour to be a lackey to vampires."

"So he wasn't, like, from a feeder family?"

"No," Dad says. "Though I think they fed from him—all of them. He was unregistered, too. From what we read, he basically acted as a dogsbody for them, and was treated atrociously, until someone reported it and Tristan found out. It's against the law for any human to be treated that way."

My brows draw together as I try to connect the dots. "I don't understand why he was made into a vampire. If it's against the law for vampires to abuse humans, and they were abusing Geoffrey, then wouldn't that have given Tristan the evidence he needed to, uh, deal with them?" I can't bring myself to say "execute." This is Australia, for fuck's sake. People don't get executed here anymore—not legally, anyway.

Unless they're vampires, apparently.

"Yep," Mum agrees. "But when the vampires he dispatched to take them into custody arrived, they found Geoffrey on the verge of rising after being made. Someone had tipped the vampires off."

I shake my head. "I don't get it. Why does him being made change anything?"

Dad opens his laptop and starts tapping at the keyboard. “The vampires claimed that Geoffrey had never been abused, that he’d been learning what it was like to be a vampire before deciding if he wanted to be made one. It’s a bullshit excuse, of course, but most humans who tag along after vampires like that *do* want to be made. Geoffrey being newly made meant that he couldn’t testify to any abuse—he wasn’t in his right mind for months—and when he finally was sane enough, well, he’d gotten what he wanted.”

“They made him into a vampire so they wouldn’t get into trouble? What, like a trade? We’ll make you a vampire if you never admit how we’ve been treating you?”

Mum nods. “Basically, yes. Though a lot of that is guesswork and leaks from the Council.”

“Leaks from the Council?”

“Tristan tried to keep the details quiet, but he had to report everything to the Council, and they weren’t as circumspect. Everyone over in Europe was talking about the Australian Scandal, and the gossip made its way back here via the Dish. The suspicious circumstances around Geoffrey being made are part of the reason the Council has banned the making of new vampires.”

I rub my forehead. “This is unhinged.”

“We’re not even close to done,” Dad says. “Some of those vampires are the ones who kidnapped and murdered Tristan’s feeder eleven years ago. They’d gotten cocky after getting away with so much over the decades, and they wanted to prove that they were more powerful than he was.”

“Is that more guesswork and leaks?”

“No, they made a video saying so and posted it on the Dish,” Mum says, her voice wavering a bit. “It was horrific. Benjamin was… It was awful, Adam. I had nightmares for years.”

I swallow, my brain instantly conjuring a list of things that might have been said and done in that video. Do I want to see it? No, but…

“It’s been taken down,” Dad tells me, obviously reading my expression. “Some people made copies and tried to get them out there again, but Tristan has them removed every time, and they don’t try again.” The implication that they’re too scared to cross Tristan is clear.

“What did he do? To the vampires?” I know the answer to this—Pierce told me. Executions. But I want the context.

Mum makes a face. “He destroyed them. All the discussion I saw refers to ‘the executions,’ and I guess technically they were, but not in the

sanitised way the word implies. He went after them and ripped them to pieces, one by one." She swallows hard. "He showed everyone exactly why the Council appointed a vampire who was barely a century old to be a regent. H-He made a video of his own, showing the pile of their limbs and organs"—*organs?!*—"a-and other parts and him setting it on fire and watching what was left of them burn to dust. Y-You could see their eyes staring out of the flames."

It sounds like something that might play at an indie film festival. I press my lips together to keep a hysterical laugh from erupting. That's the person I let sink his fangs into me twice a day. The sudden feeling of intense vulnerability that overtakes me is humbling.

"Good," I manage. "I doubt anyone would try to kidnap another one of his feeders after watching that video." I hope, anyway. But what do I know? Maybe that's like flirting for vampires.

Mum and Dad exchange a worried look. Can't say I blame them.

"Alright, so I know Geoffrey's backstory. Why would Tristan be pissed at him now? Like threw-him-at-a-wall levels of pissed."

Dad's eye twitches the way it does when he's mega stressed, and guilt pangs in my chest. "He threw someone at a wall? Adam, is he violent—"

I hold up a hand. "Stop, Dad. I mean, yeah, obviously he's violent. I just told you he threw Geoffrey at a wall, and you told me about his little film project. But I've never seen him be violent with humans." Scary and intimidating, yes. Violent… no. Not yet, anyway. "Trust me, I've been my usual self around him. If he was going to show violent tendencies toward me, I'm pretty sure it would have happened." I cross the fingers of the hand in my lap. Clive and Anna seem comfortable being around Tristan, so hopefully my faith isn't misplaced.

Neither of my parents looks convinced, but they let it go.

"We haven't been keeping up with news," Mum reminds me. "Not since we decided not to tell you about…" She waves a hand to encapsulate the concept of vampires, feeders, and a whole fucking world I never knew existed.

"I just searched Geoffrey's name in the Dish," Dad adds, turning his laptop toward me. "I haven't read any of the results yet, just the subject lines, but it doesn't look good."

I pull the computer closer to me and scan the screen. He's right, it doesn't look good. "Does Vampremacy mean what I think it does?" I click

one of the results.

“I’m guessing it’s a mashup of Vampire and Supremacy.” Dad shrugs. “Unfortunately, an IQ test isn’t a requirement to be made a vampire.”

“It should be,” I mutter, skimming the post and the replies. “That name is fucking stupid.” But if what I’m reading is right, it’s also fucking scary. I back out and click on another result. “Did anything you read back then hint that Geoffrey might not be mentally capable?”

“What do you mean?”

I back out of the second post and change the search to “Vampremacy.” “From what people are saying, he stayed with the vampires who abused him after he was made. Like, he was looked after by people Tristan assigned until he was able to maintain control, and then he went back to the ones who made him.”

“That’s not uncommon for someone who’s been abused,” Mum points out. “And he wanted to be a vampire from the beginning.”

“Mmm.” I keep reading. “Yeah, based on everything he’s done since then, it might just be that he fit right in with them, character-wise. He’s apparently the ‘leader’ of the Vampremacy movement, though a lot of people think he’s just a figurehead.” There’s a bunch of names of other vampires who are either confirmed or suspected to be part of the group, but they mean nothing to me.

“What does Vampremacy want, exactly?” Dad asks, a crease between his brows.

I shrug. “The usual bullshit. Oh, Vampremacy is a feeder nickname. The official name is Blood Reign, spelled like a reigning monarch.”

“Blood Reign?” Mum repeats. “How pretentious. No wonder the feeder community made up a stupid nickname for them.”

“Hold on, someone’s uploaded a flyer of theirs. ‘A return to the natural order of vampirism,’” I read. “Blah blah, ‘throw off the shackles of dictatorship’—can it even be called a dictatorship if there’s a whole council in charge?”

“Adam, focus,” Mum scolds.

“And no, it can’t. There are a few other terms that fit, but dictatorship isn’t one of them,” Dad adds.

“This is mostly about how they want to be able to treat humans like cattle and not have to pay to feed.” The flyer is badly designed and crowded with words, and the person who posted it claims it was left in her

employer’s mailbox and that she rescued it before he could tear it up. “Okay, that kind of checks out. I can understand why Tristan would be angry at someone who’s trying to overthrow the government.”

“So glad you can understand that,” Dad says dryly, pulling his laptop back toward him. “I’m going to email you the login details for the Dish.”

“Thank you. Hey, one thing I don’t get is, if Geoffrey is trying to turn humanity into an all-you-can-eat buffet, why was everyone more pissed that Misha saw me?”

Dad’s fingers freeze on the keyboard. “What?”

“Don’t start, okay? I’ve already been lectured and yelled at. I shouldn’t have been in the corridor, blah blah, whatever. I know. But Geoffrey’s the one who’s all ‘Down with humans,’ and yet nobody cared that he might have seen me.”

“Stop.” Mum reaches across the table and grabs my wrist. “Start again. Misha saw you?”

I try not to be concerned about the fear in her voice. “Do you know him?”

“Not personally, thank god. Stay away from him, Adam.”

“Planning to,” I assure her. “But I really wish someone would tell me why he’s so scary.”

Dad slams the laptop closed. “He’s a monster. He’s one of the vampires who was wreaking havoc before Tristan arrived. Apparently, he left Eastern Europe one step ahead of the Council. He’s an old vampire, he’s never liked the concept of feeders, and he’s known to be violent. Geoffrey is as dangerous as a fly compared to him.”

I stare at him, a chill running down my spine. I gained the attention of a vampire like that?

Great. Just great.

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Chapter 20

It's amazing the difference a month can make. I started this job feeling so lost and overwhelmed by the number of things I didn't know, but now I jump down the last few stairs and clatter down the corridor to the living room, eager to gossip with Anna. Past me would never have been this chipper before six in the morning, but present me is used to early starts and knows Anna probably didn't get online last night, so I'll get to break the news.

She looks up from her ever-present tablet, an amused smile curving her mouth. "All the martial arts work you've been doing hasn't made you more graceful," she says. "You sounded like a herd of elephants."

I bite back a grin. That's probably going to get me a sigh from Tristan. He's not the sociable, chatty type—at least not with me—but he manages to make his opinions clear. I've started awarding myself points based on the reaction I get. A frown is worth one point, a sigh is worth two, and him saying my name in that repressive tone that brings out the rebellious child in me is worth three. I'm working towards an actual lecture, which will be four points. Yelling and/or physical intimidation, like he did when I first started and fucked up badly, are a full ten points, because he's so fucking repressed that I'll have to actually endanger myself to get it.

"Sorry," I tell Anna cheerfully, taking my pre-breakfast protein shake from Clive as she rolls her eyes. "Did you see what happened in New York?"

Her brows shoot up. "Something happened in New York?"

I nod slowly, drawing out the tension. “This vampire called Rolf threw a party, and his feeder full-on attacked another vampire’s feeder, screaming about him ruining his life and how he was going to make him pay. It was an actual punch-on, with some slapping and hair pulling and scratching thrown in.”

“Really?” Her eyes are wide. “Do we know why?”

“Still working on that. Rolf and the other vampire, Stephanie, shut it down fast and have kept them both tucked away since, but one of the other feeders at the party got video.” I waggle my brows at her, and she snatches her tablet off the bench.

“Which board was it on?”

I lean over her shoulder, sipping, while Clive sniffs disapprovingly from the other side of the bench… but I notice him leaning forward slightly, trying to catch a glimpse of the screen. Clive still doesn’t really like me, but the stick isn’t wedged as far up his arse as I first thought. Mostly, he thinks I should worship Tristan more and disapproves because I don’t.

We’re watching the fight with the sound up for the third time, and Clive has deigned to come around the island to where he can see better, when a throat clears behind us. I yelp, and we spin almost in unison.

Tristan is standing there, fully dressed and looking like he’s going to an old man funeral, as usual. “What is that dreadful noise?” he asks.

I glance back at Anna’s tablet, where a six-foot-tall man is making a sound that closely resembles metal in a blender while a much smaller man tries to choke him. “It’s complicated.”

One brow goes up, and he holds out his hand. Anna obediently, if not a little reluctantly, hands over her tablet, and Tristan studies the video.

“Ah. I’m sure I don’t need to tell anyone that this sort of behaviour is completely unacceptable.” For some reason, he looks right at me when he says it.

“Watching videos?” I ask with a straight face.

He sighs. Two points for me!

I really should set a target and a reward. These points are racking up.

“It’s dreadful,” Clive declares, and I prepare for him to suck up to Tristan. “That poor housekeeper. All that work planning the party, and it’s ruined. Not to mention the rug—the stain from that red wine won’t come out easily, if it does at all.”

“I’ll sympathise about the rug,” I concede, “but I don’t agree that the party was ruined. If anything, the fight made it the party of the year. I mean, *we’re* talking about it, and we’re halfway around the world.”

Clive glares at me.

“Come on. I didn’t even know Rolf existed before today. The fight put him and his party on the map.”

“I’ll be certain to mention that the next time I speak to him,” Tristan says dryly. “He’ll be thrilled.”

“You know him? Any chance you could make a call and find out the deets behind the fight?”

He frowns and chides, “Adam.” That’s four points right there, six total in the past two minutes. Today’s started with a bang, baby!

“So that’s a no?”

He ignores me, handing the tablet back to Anna and turning his attention to her and Clive. “I need to be in Sydney for a few weeks, and I’d like to open the townhouse instead of staying in a hotel.”

“Of course.” Clive’s speaking almost before Tristan finishes. “Will you be entertaining while we’re there?”

Tristan shakes his head. “Unlikely. Perhaps some meetings or a small cocktail party, but nothing elaborate.”

A cocktail party isn’t elaborate? Come to think, what exactly does “elaborate” mean, anyway? It’s not the kind of word I hear in everyday conversation. My money’s on “fancy.”

“When do we need to leave?” Anna asks, tapping away at her tablet, and it hits me all of a sudden that if Tristan’s going to Sydney for a few weeks, so am I.

“This morning, once we’ve all eaten. Pierce has already informed the pilot.”

That’s… really soon.

Anna glances at the wall clock, frowning. “Clive, maybe a simple breakfast today? If we don’t get on the road before seven, we’ll be fighting traffic most of the way to the airport.”

“Pancakes?” he suggests. “We can bring them with us and eat them cold if necessary.”

“I’ll leave you to the arrangements,” Tristan says, striding toward the door while I slip into a daydream about Clive’s pancakes. The sound of a

throat being cleared snaps me out of it, and I glance up to see Anna staring at me. She looks pointedly toward the door.

"Fuck." I chase after Tristan and am right on his heels as he enters his office. My breakfast has to wait until he's had his.

I close the door behind me. "So, Sydney, huh? You said a few weeks? Is that, like, two or three?"

"As long as it takes." He crosses to the bench by the window, and I dutifully follow.

"As long as what takes? Is this trip because of the reports that humans are being mind-wiped?" Anna and I haven't found a reliable source, but there's a rumour going around that over the past few weeks, a higher than normal number of humans have been fed from and mind-wiped in Sydney —and that some of them were in rough shape.

Tristan doesn't answer as I sit beside him in my customary spot and hold out my wrist. He hesitates for a fraction of a second before taking it, his eyes flicking to my neck. I wouldn't even have noticed, but it's not the first time he's done it. He hasn't said anything, but my gut is telling me he wants to get a bit more *intimate* during feedings.

I'm not sure how I feel about that. The sensible side of me (and I do have one, no matter what everyone says) thinks it's a bad idea. This is my job, and living in the same house as my boss is already plenty intimate, thanks. Though to be fair, I rarely see him unless I go looking. The other side of me, the one that's most dominant, kind of wants to see what it would be like to have a vampire sucking on my neck. Cat sure seems to like it, and from what I've read on the Dish, so do a lot of other feeders.

The Dish has been a freaking lifesaver. After I spoke to my parents, I spent a day poking around the various boards, and I found one called "The Things Your Parents Don't Tell You." It's run by a bunch of teens, and if I understand right, it gets passed down through the generations, but the most important thing is, it's got all the history and gossip and *context* that I needed. Between that and the general boards, I've not only been able to avoid making big mistakes, I also feel like I might actually be part of the feeder community. I was even able to make small talk with some feeders who came to a meeting here with their vampires last week.

Tristan's fingers wrap around my arm, and he bites into my wrist. I barely feel it these days, which is nice but also complicated. It doesn't hurt,

but the lack of pain just makes me more aware of his fangs sliding into me. It's… intimate.

I never thought I'd use that word so much, but there's no other way to describe it. I understand now why people like that Spike guy I met when I registered get obsessed with the idea of feeding a vampire. There's something addictive about it.

Literally. One of the things I found out on the Dish is that the reason there's a ten-year time limit on the career of a feeder is because the enzymes in vampire saliva that allow us to feed them so regularly without becoming anaemic are actually doing a lot of heavy lifting. When they've had enough time to build up, they not only increase blood production, they also begin to speed healing beyond anything that could be considered normal. One of the official reasons the ten-year limit is in place because if that level of healing continues to increase, it could tempt a vampire to abuse their feeder, even accidentally. I don't think that's true—seems to me it's more likely vampires don't want humans to have the same healing abilities they have. It's a form of control.

I'm not planning to stick around as long as ten years, though, so it really doesn't matter to me.

Tristan's tongue glides over my skin, and I barely control my shiver. I really need to make an effort to hook up sometime soon. It's been too long if a vampire is making me horny.

He gets up and goes to his desk, saying over his shoulder, "Have something to eat and then pack. You'll need clothing that's appropriate for socialising."

Say what?

"Be more specific. Are we talking dinner with friends, clubbing, an afternoon at the footy? Socialising can mean anything."

He lifts his head from where he's been reading something in his notebook and gives me an incredulous look. "Please do share what it is about me that makes you think I would take part in any of the activities you mentioned."

"Oh, come on. You have friends!"

His brow rises.

"There's Pierce. And Nisha." I might be scraping the bottom of a barrel here.

"Pierce works for me, and Nisha is an acquaintance."

“Okay, fine. Dinner with acquaintances, then.”

A slow smile creeps across his face, the kind that terrifies me right down to my bones. Tristan is so refined and pent-up that sometimes I forget he’s also a vampire. And not just any vampire, but apparently the one who single-handedly quelled an uprising in Manchester in 1876. According to the Dish, he faced down three other vampires, and there were only pieces of them left by the end.

“My dear boy, if you were invited to a vampire dinner, clothes would very much not be needed.”

What. The. *Fuck?*

I might need to do some more research.

“Don’t invite me, then,” I manage to say even though my throat is so dry, it hurts. “But I still need to know what to pack. Jeans, a suit… what?”

His gaze flicks over me. “Clive will know what you need. Tell him I want him to arrange for you to have a haircut, too.”

My hand lifts to touch my head before I can stop it. Sure, I’m a bit late for my usual visit to the barber, but my hair’s not that long. “No, thanks.”

“It wasn’t a request, Adam. You’re beginning to look unkempt.”

My mouth falls open, and I sputter indignantly.

“Go. I’ll be very displeased if we have to wait for you.”

I snap my mouth closed so fast that my teeth click, then stomp toward the door. I want to say something sharp and witty, but my brain’s blanked on me. I’ll probably think of the perfect comeback in a week.

Meanwhile, there is absolutely no fucking way I’m getting a haircut.

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Chapter 21

This is my first time travelling with Tristan. He's had to make a couple of trips since I started working for him, but they were all day trips, and the only reason I even knew about them was because he moved the time of his evening feed to later.

So I don't think I can be blamed for my confusion when Anna drove us to Essendon Airport instead of Tullamarine. I've never even been to Essendon Airport before—why would I have? It's where regional airlines, corporate jets, and super small planes live. Most commercial flights leave from Tullamarine, or a few from Avalon.

That's when I remembered Tristan saying something about a pilot and realised I was about to take my first ever flight on a private plane. My first thought was to wonder who I could video call from on board, and sadly the answer was no one—except maybe Cat. Most of my friends think I now work as the junior assistant to a rich guy. I kept the details vague, and I'm pretty sure Ladi, at least, thinks I'm working for an underworld figure. He dropped some heavy hints about rewatching *Underbelly*.

Anyway, private planes? Fucking insane, man. I've seen them on TV a million times, and I still gawked like an idiot when I stepped inside. The whole flight, I wanted to run around the cabin and explore everything. I didn't, but mostly because Clive was sitting next to me and every time I so much as twitched a finger, he glared. I think if I'd tried to get up, he would have full-on tackled me.

But now we're in yet another expensive black SUV—I haven't worked out yet if Tristan really likes black or if he just prefers to be subtle—

crawling through Sydney traffic on our way to Tristan's place.

"Where's the house?" I ask. I have zero familiarity with navigating around Sydney, having never been here. I'm aware of how weird that is, considering that my parents grew up here and Melbourne is only a short one-hour flight or eight-hour drive away. Maybe this will be my chance to check out the city. I could even try to set up a meeting with my grandparents—I should ask Cat for some phone numbers. I've heard lots of good things about grandparents adoring and spoiling their grandkids, and I'm not opposed to being adored.

Anna meets my gaze in the rearview mirror. "Potts Point. Why?"

I shrug. "No reason. Maybe I'll visit my family while I'm here. It's been a long time since I've seen them in person." Like, never.

Clive, who's sitting beside her in the front, turns around to give me a suspicious glare. He's been huffing and puffing ever since I told him Tristan wanted him to oversee my packing and he got a look at my wardrobe. What with all the work I've been doing to learn about vampire society, I never got around to shopping for clothes like I planned to. Today's reason for me being in his bad books is that my clothes aren't suitable for socialising as Tristan's feeder, and I didn't tell him before. How was I supposed to know? I think my clothes are fine.

Anyway, he stormed out of my room with his phone to his ear after telling me he was going to order some things and I'd try them on *or else*. Is it a tiny bit weird that I kind of like riling up Clive? It's like teasing a sibling, except I've never had a sibling and don't know what that's like. Plus, Clive's at least thirty years older than me and would probably hate it if I said he was like a sibling to me.

Hm. Something to save for another day.

"You're needed today for fittings," he reminds me, and Tristan turns his head to look at me.

"For what?" I ask. Fittings? Huh?

Clive's eyes narrow. "Your new clothes are being delivered and need to be tailored to fit."

"Whoa. You just said I had to try them on, not anything about tailoring. Do I look like the kind of guy who has his clothes tailored?" What does that even mean, anyway?

From the seat behind me, Pierce clears his throat, and Tristan swings his head away to look out the window, but not before I see the tiniest curve of

his mouth. Clive's gaze skims over me, and his lip curls.

"You do not, but you will. Tristan has a standard to maintain."

I roll my eyes but give in. Anything to make my "big brother" happy, though I don't know what's wrong with my clothes. I have nice pants and a few going-out shirts—those should be fine for whatever the fuck socialising we're going to be doing.

"Fine, I'll stay home today. But you can't keep me locked up with tailors for the next two weeks."

He sniffs and turns back around in his seat, ignoring me. I'm not sure if that means he's planning to keep me locked up or he doesn't care what I do after I've been tailored. Whatever, I'll find out soon enough.

Meanwhile, I pull out my phone, open a browser window, and type in "Potts Point." I'm not surprised to see that it's an expensive suburb on the harbor, close to the CBD, but I am surprised to read that it's trendy. Busy nightlife and food and drink scene. Not the kind of place that appeals to Tristan at all. But then, he probably bought it a hundred years ago or something.

It's great news for me, though. Clive's a ripper cook, but I'm not used to eating at home this much, and I've got an itch for a restaurant with a top bartender and a complicated cocktail menu.

Anna turns the car down a side street that turns out to be a laneway, then turns again into another laneway. Where the hell are we even going? I lean forward to peer through the windscreen just as she picks up a remote control from the centre console and pushes a button. Ahead and to the left, a garage door begins to open.

The garage we park in is huge. There's already a car in it, and as I wait for the door to close so Anna will let me get out of the car, I guess that at least one more could fit. Maybe two, if they were small.

The second the garage door meets the ground, Anna unlocks the car. She's not always this paranoid when it's just me and her, but if Tristan or Clive is with us, her protectiveness soars into the stratosphere. I don't want to ask her why, just in case that makes it worse for me. Cat thinks it's because not many people know who I am yet.

I'm stretching when a small door at the back of the garage opens and a blue-haired young woman dressed like a uni student steps in.

"Cool hair," I say before I can stop myself. Nobody's reacting to her presence, so I figure they know who she is.

She flashes me a smile but addresses Tristan first. “Welcome, Tristan. I printed the documents you sent and put them in your office, but Jennifer called to say she would be ten minutes late.”

He nods. “Thank you, Lauren. This is Adam, my feeder.” He shoots me a glance. “Lauren is the caretaker here. She’ll show you your room while Clive and Anna get settled.”

I don’t have a chance to reply before he and Pierce are striding through the door, so I give Lauren all my attention. “Nice to meet you. What’s a caretaker do, anyway?” I grab my bag off the pile Anna is unloading from the car, ready to follow wherever I need to go.

“Not a lot,” she replies bluntly. “I live here so the house isn’t empty, make sure the rooms are dusted, vacuumed, and aired out, and when I get a call to say that people are coming, I stock up on groceries or anything else that’s needed.” She winks. “Like a tailor and a barber.” I stifle my groan as she turns to Clive. “The kettle’s hot, and all the rooms have been checked and the beds made,” she reports to him. “There were a couple of things on your list that the local supermarket didn’t have, but I’ll run out now and grab them.”

He gives her a nod and… *smiles*? Fuck, it’s a super rare Clive smile! Someone alert the media. “Thank you, Lauren. I’m sure everything is as it should be.” I get a snide side-eye before he adds, “You are the perfect scion of a legacy family.”

Wowwww. Was that supposed to put me in my place? Clive’s getting bitchy.

“Do you have uni today?” Anna says hastily, probably wanting to change the subject before I start a fight. Though it totally would have been Clive’s fault. “I can go to the shops if you’ve got stuff on.”

Lauren shakes her head. “Nah, all good. This is my free day. I’ll take Adam up, if that’s okay with you? The stylist and tailor will be here in about an hour.”

“Stylist?” I blurt. Nobody said anything about a stylist.

“That would be wonderful, thank you,” Clive says, ignoring me. “I’ll have morning tea ready in half an hour.”

The petty bitch in me rears his head. “Are we having scones? I’m craving scones.”

To my disappointment, Clive merely nods. “We’ll have scones, then.”

No twitching eye or set jaw? Not even a frown? He must have been planning to make scones anyway.

“Fab,” Lauren announces. “I haven’t had a decent scone in ages. Come on, Adam.” She turns and makes for the door, and I obediently follow with my bag in hand.

We step into a hallway with a glass wall extending the entire length of the right side. Beyond the windows is a paved courtyard with two-story vertical gardens on the opposite wall and cushy outdoor furniture set up around a firepit. I pause to stare, and Lauren comes back and tugs on my arm.

“Come on. Tristan didn’t say he wanted to introduce you, so we need to get you upstairs and then back down to the kitchen before Jennifer arrives.”

That gets me moving. It doesn’t sound like this Jennifer is dangerous—at least not more than any other vampire—but after the last time, I’m not risking anything. “Let’s go.”

The corridor opens into a huge kitchen-slash-meals area that has huge glass bifold doors leading into the courtyard we just passed. The room is a lot more modern than I would expect for a house Tristan owns, and as we pass through it into a living room, the contrast in style is obvious.

“Why does this room feel like it was built in the 1800s and the kitchen feels like it was built last year?” I look around at the stupidly high ceilings with ornate plasterwork and the huge marble fireplaces, then glance back over my shoulder into the sleek kitchen.

“Because this is the original part of the house, which was built in the 1890s, and the kitchen was added on in the sixties and then renovated in the eighties and again five years ago,” Lauren reports, leading me through a doorway into the front hallway. To my right, the wide corridor ends with a solid door surrounded by intricate stained-glass windows. There’s another room near it, and I can hear the murmur of voices, which means Tristan and Pierce are in there.

To my left, where Lauren gestures for me to go, is a staircase, and at the top, a funny little landing with several sets of stairs going in different directions. “Old houses are weird.”

“The word you’re looking for is ‘character,’” she corrects, but she’s grinning like she agrees with me. “This way.”

I’m pretty sure the room she shows me to is at the front of the house, and a quick peek out the big french windows proves me right—and shows

me that I have my own little balcony. Score.

The room is huge and comfortable, and Lauren quickly shows me the modern en suite bathroom and how to use the shower, which is way fancier than anything I've ever seen before. Who needs a tap when they can have a control panel, am I right? There are days when I think this isn't so much a job as it is a whole damn lifestyle.

I dump my clothes out of my bag onto the bed and spread them out a bit.

"What are you doing?" Lauren asks, fascinated.

"Tristan and Clive have this thing about creases," I grumble.

She looks at the jumbled mess on my bed. "That's not going to prevent creases."

I shrug and make for the door. "Maybe not, but when they ask, I can say I unpacked. Let's get some scones."

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Chapter 22

I DIDN'T ACTUALLY THINK Tristan was serious when he said I'd need to socialise. Why would I? I've been working for him for a month, and aside from that one meeting last week, it's never come up. I figured he was trying to annoy me the same way I'm always trying to (respectfully) annoy him. It's a thing we do.

Turns out, he was serious.

Which is why on my second night in Sydney I'm in the back seat of the car with Tristan beside me and Anna anxiously repeating the security protocol for the nine millionth time while she navigates Sydney traffic. In the passenger seat beside her, Pierce has been nonstop texting since we got into the car fifteen minutes ago.

"Adam, what did I just say?" Anna demands, and I hold in a sigh. She's worried about my safety, though I'm not completely sure why. Tristan will be with me, and I doubt he'd have brought me along if he couldn't take anyone who wants to cause trouble.

"If I feel even a tiny bit uneasy and Tristan's not in sight, I call or text you," I parrot. "But I swear I'll stay glued to Tristan's side all night. I peed before we left, so I should be good."

Tristan stirs, probably because he's uptight about bodily functions being openly talked about, and I send a big grin his way. "You're stuck with me tonight, boss. Hey, is there anything you need me to do? Should I be, like, trying to charm someone?"

The car jerks as Anna's foot stutters on the brake, and Pierce stops texting and actually turns to look at me incredulously. "You? Charming?"

“I can be charming,” I protest. “I can charm the pants off people.”

“Please don’t do that tonight,” Tristan murmurs. “I’m here to smooth over problems, not have my feeder cause new ones.”

Ouch. Though… valid. Pants-off action probably isn’t what tonight’s all about. Shame.

“Okay, so what are the problems you’re smoothing? What should I be watching out for?”

“Your own safety,” Anna insists, glaring at me in the rearview mirror.

I roll my eyes. “Anna, I’ll be *fine*. I’m not going to be alone the whole night.” Her insistence on this is starting to worry me, though. What the hell is going on that I need to be so careful? Is this just because she won’t be inside with us, or is there something else? I turn my most solemn look on Tristan. “Seriously, I’m going to be on my best behaviour. I know I can be a shit sometimes, but I wouldn’t embarrass you in public.” Not intentionally, anyway. I wanna keep this job.

Tristan studies me for a moment, then nods. “I don’t imagine you would. Very well. You’re aware of the situation with the”—his lip curls with disgust—“Blood Reign movement?”

“Yeah.” Aside from what I found out that day at my parents’ place, I’ve been very active on the Dish since. Geoffrey and the older vampires pulling his strings have been ramping up their efforts to smear Tristan, claiming that all they want is the freedom to live and feed as nature intended, and that Tristan and the Council are persecuting them. They’re very good at talking around the subject in a very wide circle that skims over the fact that they want to be able to prey on humans without consent or compensation. The scary part is, there’s a decent chunk of the vampire community, both here and overseas, that’s starting to listen. Geoffrey might have been a Renfield wannabe who got lucky, but he’s a gifted salesman, and his pitch is given more weight because of his situation before he was made. Vampires argue that if *he* thinks humans should be cattle, after having been pretty much treated that way, then there might be some validity to what he’s saying.

That means that instead of being able to eviscerate those involved with Vampremacy, Tristan’s forced to negotiate with them. He can’t risk the balance of support tipping too far toward them. That’s what Geoffrey was doing at the house that day, though negotiations stalled when his first demand was for the right to drink humans dry, aka kill them.

Incidentally, Misha isn't officially affiliated with Vampremacy, but everyone knows he supports their policies. He's never been happy with the Council and the feeder law. Nobody can say for sure why he doesn't join the movement, but it works in our favour. Right now, a lot of vampires who want to go back to the old ways are holding back because they think Misha knows something about Vampremacy that's stopping him from joining them.

Also, I learned a lot more about Misha, and I seriously regret ever letting him notice me.

"I know you've heard that in the last few weeks, there has been a spate of attacks and forced feedings here in Sydney. Humans have been arriving at the Association office here claiming that they blacked out in a public place and came to holding the Association's business card and feeling a strong need to go there. Some of them were injured."

My stomach sinks. "That's a mind wipe, right? And compulsion." All vampires have the ability to wipe memories, but only some can actually control minds. Even then, it's super limited—which is a good thing for humanity.

"Indeed. The medics at the Association report that, aside from the obvious violence, those humans show signs of having been fed from and far more blood taken than is legal. None of them were registered or had any knowledge of vampires, and none of them remember anything out of the ordinary before they 'blacked out.'"

"Have there been any deaths?" Anxiety claws at my chest. This is way heavier than I was expecting.

"Not that we can connect to this. There has been an increase in deaths with burnt corpses in recent months, but as yet we have no way to prove they were killed by vampires."

Fun fact: Fire has always been a tool vampires used to hide their kills. Bite marks and bruises are harder—if not impossible—to discern from charred flesh, and the heat of the flames removes the water content of blood, making it difficult to tell how much is missing. If there's been a rash of barbecued dead people, it's a fair bet that a vampire is on a killing spree.

"So we think Vampremacy are doing this? Why?"

"Blood Reign," he corrects, because he might hate them, but he hates nicknames more. "We weren't certain until they began accusing me of orchestrating it."

“What?” I blink a few times, trying to understand. “They think you organised to have vampires illegally feed and send the victims to the Association?”

“Yes. They claim that I’m trying to frame them for crimes against humans, and that it’s obviously me because who else would leave the humans alive and send them to the Association.”

This is getting ridiculous. “*Could* someone be framing them? Not you,” I add quickly. “But, like, could some wanker think it’s taking too long to get rid of them and be trying to help? Because the alternative is that they’re attacking people to frame you by accusing you of framing them.” I pause. “Wait, I don’t think that sentence is right.”

“Your meaning is clear enough, and yes, it’s possible that someone is framing them. Our investigators are exploring all avenues, but Geoffrey has taken advantage of this to go on the attack. He claims that I have shut down negotiations and refuse to reopen them, and that this is my attempt to discredit his organisation.”

“What a cunt. He’s smarter than I want him to be.”

“Agreed.”

“So this visit is you showing your face and assuring people that everything’s under control?”

“Partly damage control, yes. I also want to personally oversee the investigation, and it seems I may have to reopen negotiations.”

I bite my lip as Anna slows the car and turns into a driveway. There’s a big gate but it’s open, and a man in an all-black suit is standing in its place. Behind him, I can see a wide forecourt and half a dozen people crossing it to the mansion beyond.

“He’s playing you,” I murmur, leaning closer to Tristan in an attempt to keep our conversation private as Anna lowers the window to speak with the security guard. “They’re not going to change their demands, which means negotiations are going to stall again.”

Tristan nods. “Yes.” His eyes flicker to the security guard, then back to me. “Your presence tonight will hopefully remind others that humans are people, and that the introduction of feeders was necessary to save us from annihilation.”

“So I should be charming.”

The tiniest chuckle, barely a breath of air, accompanies his eye roll. “You should also listen. There is a very good chance that someone here

tonight knows something about these attacks."

Pride spreads through me like a warm glow as I realise Tristan is asking for my help. He trusts me to help. I'm not just his snack—he sees me as a person with intelligence. I hold back the urge to offer a high five.

"Got it. Smile on, ears open."

He seems like he's going to say something else, but Anna turns around at that moment.

"This is where I leave you, I'm afraid. Parking is down the street." She doesn't sound happy about that, and I would bet real money that once the car is parked, she'll be back to loiter around the front of the property.

"Thank you, Anna. That's fine." Tristan opens his door to get out, and I follow suit on my side.

"Remember what I said," Anna hisses at me, and I pause to smile reassuringly at her.

"I will, I promise. See you later."

In line with her many, *many* security protocols, I wait exactly where I am until Tristan and Pierce have reached the front of the car, and then I go to join them. Anna waits until we're well beyond the wall enclosing the property before she backs out of the driveway, and it's stupid, but the second she puts the car in reverse, I feel vulnerable. I haven't been anywhere without being in her line of sight since that visit to my parents' place.

Tristan's crossing the cobbled forecourt with a brisk stride, and I keep up, sticking to his left. Pierce is on his right, and I wonder—not for the first time—why his feeder didn't come on this trip. Is he using temps? Why? I keep meaning to ask Anna, but the timing is never right.

The front door of the mansion is open, and an attractive, well-dressed couple with that charismatic aura I've come to associate with vampires is standing just inside. Those would be our hosts for the evening, Paul and Selene DeMarte. They're a vampire power couple but still young, only in their eighties. Officially they haven't shown a preference for either side in the current conflict, but based on things I've seen on the Dish, my guess is that they're on Tristan's side. They're apparently very good to their feeders, which is telling.

It occurs to me that if the members of Vampremacy are so anti feeders existing, they probably don't have any, and that means they don't have access to the feeder gossip network. I'm barely in it myself yet, but it's still

been an incredible source of information. I can only imagine how much better it would be if I was in active contact with more people. I make a mental note to talk about this with Tristan… or maybe Anna first. It could be a good way to get some of the information we need.

Tristan ascends the wide steps to the front door, and Pierce gestures for me to go next. I take a breath, straighten my suit jacket and cuffs, and step into my first ever vampire party.

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Chapter 23

I SO DON'T BELONG HERE. That's not me putting myself down, either, because I don't *want* to belong here. For one thing, who the hell thinks it's a good idea to go to a party in a suit? Unless it's a wedding or something, and even then everyone knows the fun only starts after guys take off their jackets and women take off their shoes.

From the looks of this crowd, nobody will be taking anything off.

I try to look interested and impressed—which I kind of am, this house is fucking lit—and stick close to Tristan's side as he greets our hosts.

"…so glad you could join us, even if the circumstances aren't ideal," Selene is saying in a soft, well-modulated voice. If a voice could sound rich, that would be how she sounds. It's not even the accent, just the volume and… everything. I guess I'm not rich or posh enough to know how to describe it.

"It's always a pleasure," Tristan says, and it actually sounds like he means it. I'm going to ask him later if Paul and Selene fall into the acquaintances category or if they're actually friends.

Knowing him, he'll say neither.

He gestures toward me without turning and adds, "Allow me to introduce Adam Barale, my feeder."

Both our hosts look me over with keen interest, which is disconcerting. "Welcome, Adam," Paul says, and I incline my head the way Cat taught me.

"Thank you for including me this evening. Your home is gorgeous." I flash my most charming smile, the one that frequently gets me out of trouble. They both smile back, giving me a peek of fang.

“The Barales are always most welcome in our home,” Selene tells me, and I cling to my smile. The way she said that makes me think— “In fact, your cousin Adrian is here this evening.”

Yep. Please god, let Cat have told the fam about me working for Tristan. “Is he? That’s great; I’ve been meaning to visit while we’re here.” Now I just have to work out who he is without giving away my secret. Adrian? I don’t remember Cat mentioning him, but then, I didn’t really listen when she talked about the family. That came back to bite me in the arse.

Footsteps behind us have Tristan saying, “We won’t monopolise your company, but I’m certain there will be time to chat later.”

Paul agrees, then exchanges a glance with his wife. “You should know, it’s likely that Geoffrey will put in an appearance this evening.”

Ooh. They really are trying to appear neutral, aren’t they… or maybe they’re playing both sides?

Tristan’s face doesn’t change. “How interesting that he’s in Sydney. Do excuse us. I see Helen.” His hand clasps my elbow firmly and pulls me away. Behind us, I hear Pierce greeting our hosts, but I keep my attention on Tristan and the direction we’re headed. Nearly all eyes in the room are on us, either covertly while their owners chat with others or in open stares. I can’t even ask Tristan if Geoffrey being here works in our favour or not, because vampire hearing means half the room will know what I’m saying.

We stop in front of a tall, willowy blond woman—vampire—and a brown-haired man who looks to be a few years older than me, presumably her feeder. The woman inclines her head to Tristan in a gesture that on anyone else would be a nod, but from her seems like the deepest bow of respect.

“Tristan,” she says coolly. “I heard you’d be here. Trying to clean up this mess?”

“Of course. It always falls to the regent to fix the problems others cause.”

Hello, subtext. Too bad I’ve always been terrible at understanding subtlety.

Pale blue eyes land on me. “And this must be your new feeder.”

Tristan’s hand tightens on my elbow. “Adam, this is Helen Dahl.”

I incline my head, glad that custom doesn’t allow me to shake hands. This lady gives me the creeps. “Ms. Dahl.”

“Don’t think you can ignore me, cuz,” the man says, and my gaze jerks to his face. He’s smiling, but there’s a message for me in his eyes. “Just because I beat you at backyard cricket last Christmas is no reason to sulk.”

I must have done something right in a past life, because Cat’s obviously filled the family in enough for this guy—apparently my cousin Adrian—to know he needs to tip me off about who he is.

“You cheated,” I reply, playing along with his story, then flash a grin. “But I guess I can forgive you. Good to see you, man.” I hold out my hand, and we exchange a backslapping handshake-slash-hug.

“How charming,” Helen says in a tone that indicates the opposite. “Adrian, I can hardly imagine you indulging in… how did you put it? Backyard cricket.”

Adrian’s flinch is barely noticeable, but it gets my back up. I may have only just met him, but he’s family and he helped me out. If his vampire’s mistreating him, I’ll…

Fuck.

I don’t know what I’ll do, but I’m sure I can work it out.

“I like to keep family life separate from work,” he says, which doesn’t really make sense to me but has Helen’s lips tightening.

“How very sensible,” Tristan muses, and I’m definitely missing some subtext here, because that should be a compliment and somehow it sounds like a dig. “Perhaps you could learn from your feeder, Helen. Sensible has never been your forte, after all.”

The words land like stones; I guess Tristan’s given up on subtext. Would it be too obvious of me to pull out my phone and search the Dish for Helen’s backstory?

“Really?” Helen’s voice has gone from cool to icy. “You choose now to do this? Be careful, Tristan, or you may find yourself alone and drowning.”

“Is that a threat?”

“You may take it as one if you wish to do so.”

The sound that comes from Tristan’s throat can only be described as a growl, and my heartbeat picks up speed. This can’t be happening. Anna didn’t give me any instructions on what to do if a fucking vampire fight broke out. Should I text her? Am I still supposed to stick to Tristan’s side if he’s in the middle of a punch-on?

Do vampires even punch each other, or do they just try to rip each other apart with their teeth? There are still so many gaps in my knowledge of

vampire society.

After a long, very tense moment in which all conversation in the room stops, Helen looks away.

“I believe we’ll circulate,” Tristan says, sounding like the almost-fight never happened. “Adam should meet people.”

I paste on a smile that I’m pretty sure is fooling nobody and meet Adrian’s gaze. He gives me a tiny nod, which I find reassuring for reasons I don’t understand, and then I let Tristan draw me on to the next group.

An hour later, I’ve met a dozen vampires, some of whom creeped me the fuck out, and about half that many feeders. Some of them were my type of people, and we exchanged numbers. A few were friendly enough, but we either didn’t have much in common or I got the impression that my surname put them off, and one had a stick jammed so far up her arse, I almost called her Tristan by mistake. The one question I really want to ask is why some vampires brought their feeders and others didn’t. Is it just a matter of preference? Do some get along better than others? Are some of the vampires here tonight expecting this party to turn into a fight—which it already nearly did—and didn’t want to risk their feeders being hurt?

I’m talking to a feeder called Amanda when the vibe in the room changes. Amanda glances over my shoulder and sucks in a breath, then glances around to see where her vampire is. Not a good sign. I check that Tristan is still within arm’s reach of me and turn to see what’s got everyone’s attention.

Misha.

The tall blond man is standing dead centre under the chandelier that dominates the huge entrance hall, a smirk on his too-handsome face. The light gleams gold in his hair, and he’d look like a Renaissance angel if not for that smirk. It sends a cold chill down my spine, and I find myself inching a bit closer to Tristan. Why is he here? Paul said Geoffrey might be coming, but nobody mentioned Misha. Why is he even in Sydney—is this a sign that he’s involved in the recent attacks? I can definitely believe he’s behind the burnt bodies.

He starts in our direction, and as though it’s a signal, the little group of vampires around Tristan draws back. I note with half my attention that only the one who didn’t bring his feeder stays; the rest take their vulnerable humans and scatter. Too bad I can’t go with them.

Instead, I stay at Tristan's side. He hasn't turned to face Misha yet, hasn't even looked in his direction, and if he can pretend Misha's inconsequential, then so can I.

Or at least, I could if my heartbeat would slow the fuck down. Every vampire in the room can probably tell that I'm not chill right now.

"Don't you look fine, little bird."

If I thought the room was quiet before, I've learned better now. Aside from the instrumental background music, there isn't a sound to be heard—just a lot of shocked faces on display. My breath is frozen in my chest. Even I know that it's unacceptable for a vampire to address a feeder without some indication from their vampire that it's okay, and *never* before acknowledging their vampire first. Misha just fired the first salvo in a battle I'm not prepared for.

Tristan pushes me behind him as he squares up to the blond, fangs out on full display. "Back. Away."

Misha grins and doesn't take his eyes off me. "Cat got your tongue? I don't recall you being shy last time we met." Somehow, he makes it sound dirty—or maybe it's the way his gaze skims over my body. I'm suddenly very grateful for this suit that covers more of me than my preferred T-shirt and trackies.

A hushed murmur runs around the room, and I send out a silent apology to the generations of Barales who worked so hard to establish our family's reputation. I didn't even do anything wrong, and still I've managed to smear mud on it.

"Do not speak to him." Tristan's hiss cuts the air, and finally Misha looks at him… and tsks.

"So protective, Tristan. Almost as though you're afraid you can't keep him."

I don't even see Tristan move. In the space between heartbeats, Misha's on the floor with Tristan crouched over him, one foot on his chest, hand at his throat. "Give me a reason," he growls, and I try not to piss myself. Am I about to witness a murder?

Does it count as murder if the victim is already dead?

Can Misha really be called a victim, given all the shit he's done?

Am I really debating morality and nomenclature right now?

"What the hell? So much for Tristan being a pillar of law and order."

There’s a rustle as people turn toward the door, but I’m too scared to move. Only my eyes flicker in that direction.

Geoffrey, flanked on either side by vampires wearing sneers to match his.

Is this a fucking joke?

Or… a setup?

Awareness is a lightning bolt in my brain. Vampremacy have been trying to build support for a long time, but Tristan’s been standing in their way. A lot of vampires who might have thrown their lot in with Vampremacy have stayed neutral because of Tristan’s reputation. How better to win those vampires over than to discredit him?

I swallow hard. Tonight might be a turning point that nobody expected.

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Chapter 24

NUMBLY, I spare a thought for the fact that this eliminates any doubt about whether Misha's aligned with Vampremacy. He walked into this party, and the first thing he did was pick a fight with Tristan—just in time for Geoffrey to swoop in. It makes total sense. Otherwise, I would've expected more of a fight from someone with Misha's reputation.

Of course, we can't prove it, even if it is logical. In the meantime, there are now four vampires in this room who are definitely the enemy, and I'm not sure what kind of backup Tristan has. Pierce, for sure, but the others? I don't know.

Tristan doesn't take his eyes off Misha. "Stay away from my feeder." The low rumble, so unlike his usual voice, would probably do very bad yet fun things to me if I wasn't shit scared right now. My dick is still paying attention, in a half-hearted kind of way.

Misha says something too low for me to hear, but whatever it is sends Tristan over the edge. Blood spurts, and a murmur goes up from the watching vampires. Paul rushes forward, but Tristan holds up his free hand to stop him. His body is blocking my line of sight, so I can't see exactly where the blood is coming from, but I'm guessing Misha's neck. Fuck, I think I need to call Anna.

"I will rip out your throat," Tristan threatens. Fun fact: Vampires don't have claws. What they do have is brute strength, enough to bust through skin and muscle with the blunt tips of their fingers.

"Please," Paul begs. "Not here." That has absolutely no impact, so he adds, "You're so close to a truce."

“Are we, though?” Misha garbles, and more blood spurts, spattering gruesomely across the white marble floor tiles.

“Is this the kind of example the regent sets?” Geoffrey needles, tsking. He hasn’t moved from the doorway, but he’s projecting clearly. Not that he’d need to—the room is quiet enough that I can hear my own jagged breaths. “Is this what he’s defending? The right for vampires to attack each other over *humans*?” The last word is a sneer. “Feeders degrade us to the level of animals, unable to restrain ourselves even at times like this.” His gesture encapsulates the elegant room and formal outfits. His gambit isn’t complex or sophisticated, but it’s still working. These vampires might know he’s playing them, but that doesn’t change the fact that Tristan, an arbiter of control and discipline, *the goddamn regent*, has attacked another vampire at a fancy party… because of a feeder. I can almost see the thoughts circling behind their eyes—would things be better if no vampire had a reason to be possessive of a human?

I want to scream at them that it’s wrong, that Geoffrey is a turd, but nothing I, a feeder, can say will make this situation better. Plus I’m pretty sure that Tristan would actually murder me if I drew even more attention to myself.

Tristan’s voice cuts through the haze of doubt and confusion. “I defend what’s *mine*, whether it’s vampire, human, or object, as every vampire who ever lived has done since the first of us rose.” He’s still not looking at Geoffrey, and logically that’s because Misha is the more immediate threat, but it has the added bonus of making it seem as though he considers Geoffrey insignificant. “Perhaps once you’ve lived longer, you’ll understand the nature of being vampire.”

I clamp my jaw tightly closed so my mouth doesn’t do something stupid like protest that I don’t belong to anyone. That would be monumentally disastrous here, surrounded by vampires who are only restrained by the fact that I “belong” to one of their own. Especially right now, with the ripple of agreement that Tristan’s statement has brought. With two sentences, he’s turned the tide of doubt. I should have had more confidence in him.

Geoffrey’s face twists with hatred. “I understand being vampire better than you do!” he shouts, but the childish rebuttal only solidifies Tristan’s victory. Around the room, vampires are shaking their heads or turning away with the kind of expressions adults wear when they see kids having tantrums. It’s a timely reminder that to some of these vampires, Geoffrey is

literally a child, and one that Tristan, their leader, just scolded. That reminder makes it hard for them to take him seriously, and I wonder if Tristan made a mistake. He might want other vampires to ignore Geoffrey, but that doesn't mean Geoffrey isn't dangerous.

He starts toward Tristan, his gaze narrowed with single-minded intensity on the top of my vampire's head, but one of his sidekicks grabs his arm and says something. It's too low for me to hear, but Geoffrey stops, grits his teeth, and turns away, yanking his arm free. He scans the room and then makes his way toward a group clustered near the stairs.

My throat is dryer than the Simpson Desert, and I'm not even in the clear yet. With Geoffrey seemingly occupied, I turn my attention back to Tristan and Misha. There's a decent-sized puddle of blood on the marble tiles now, which worries me a little. Vampire blood usually doesn't raise bloodlust in other vampires, and anyway, "civilised" vampires don't go places where humans might be if they haven't fed recently, but history is full of unfortunate accidents and coincidences. It would be just my luck for there to be a vampire here tonight who hasn't fed recently enough to maintain control in the presence of blood, even if it isn't human blood.

"Well?" Misha asks, the sound making me jump. His voice is guttural, and blood stains his teeth, but the provoking smirk is still on his face. "What happens now? Are you vampire enough to kill your sire?"

It takes a few seconds for the words to sink in, and then the bottom drops out of my stomach. Misha is Tristan's *sire*? Why didn't I see that anywhere on the Dish when I was doing my research?

"The only thing that keeps you alive is my respect for my hosts," Tristan replies, his voice as cold as ice. "But even that has limits."

I try to remember everything I ever read about vampire sires. Since the act of turning a human into a vampire is deliberate and new vampires are so volatile and unstable, it's incredibly rare for a vampire not to maintain a connection to their sire. Most vampires were made on battlefields or sickbeds. It was considered safer for vampires to live in nests of at least three, so that if they were hunted, they wouldn't be fighting alone. To this end, vampires would often search out humans who were near death and offer them a chance to live in exchange for their loyalty. The blood exchange would take place, the human would die shortly after from their injuries or illness, and then they would rise as a vampire. Their sire would keep them fed and controlled until they regained their sanity, after which

they would join the nest for years—sometimes decades—before striking out on their own. Even when they did leave, there was always a connection to their sire, kind of a lifelong allyship.

Except that's obviously not the case here, since Tristan is on the verge of ripping out Misha's spine.

"I apologise," Misha says suddenly, and stunned silence falls. It seemed like not many people were paying attention anymore, but clearly they were.

Tristan seems just as surprised as everyone else. He doesn't move, and after a brief hesitation, Selene and Paul come forward, Pierce only a step behind them.

"You will give Tristan and his feeder the respect due them?" Selene asks Misha.

"I will." His smirk is still firmly in place. I really don't like this guy.

Selene glances at her husband, then Tristan, who hasn't moved, but it's Pierce who murmurs his name.

Tristan sucks in a breath through his teeth, then releases Misha and springs out of his crouch in a way that's decidedly not human, landing in front of me.

"Don't push me again," he warns.

Misha slowly gets to his feet, being careful not to slip in the pool of his own blood. His face is pale, and there are three gaping wounds in his throat—holes from Tristan's thumb and first two fingers. My eyes lock onto the gory sight, and I swallow hard, trying to keep from chucking up my dinner.

"I believe I'll take my leave now," he says, almost mockingly. "I'm in need of a snack after all this exertion."

For some reason I don't have the brainpower to work out, that makes Tristan growl, but he doesn't move from where he's shielding me. Misha's eyes meet mine, and while he doesn't say anything to me, it's a statement in and of itself.

And then he turns and leaves.

Paul gestures, and two humans, presumably staff, hurry over and start cleaning up the blood on the floor. The volume of the soft background music rises slightly, and gradually, conversations resume.

My heartbeat finally slows to something close to normal. Is this what all vampire parties are like, or did I just get lucky with my first one?

Tristan turns around and looks me up and down.

“I’m fine,” I volunteer, keeping my voice as low as I can manage. “Uh, maybe you should…” I nod toward his hands, which are covered in blood. His shirt’s pretty much a loss, and maybe his suit too, though it’s black and the blood doesn’t show. It just looks like a big wet patch. For some reason, that makes me want to gag.

Selene appears at his side. “Let me show you where you can wash up.”

“Bring me a towel,” Tristan counters. “I won’t leave my feeder unguarded.”

Selene’s expression reflects how insulted she is by that, but she persists. “Nobody would dare touch him. It will only take a few moments.”

He hesitates. I know my super fastidious vampire wants to wash his hands, but with Geoffrey still in the room, I’m glad he doesn’t want to leave me alone. Still…

“I’ll be fine,” I declare, fucking bravely if you ask me. “I’ll just…” I glance around and catch my cousin’s eye. He and his vampire are coming toward us. “Adrian will keep me company.”

To his credit, Adrian doesn’t blink, just slings an arm around my shoulders. “Absolutely.”

“Are you being tiresomely overprotective?” Helen asks Tristan in a bored tone. “I do wish you’d outgrow that. Go and wash.” She flicks her hand in a shooing motion. “Pierce and I will watch over your human.”

Tristan gives her a narrow-eyed glare, then turns it on me. “Do not leave this room,” he warns, and I nod. “Shout if anybody comes near you,” he adds, and I have to consciously stop myself from rolling my eyes.

Finally, he turns and stalks away, Selene hurrying at his side while Paul gestures for more drinks to be served. Pierce looks at me.

“Okay?” he whispers, and I nod. “Since Anna hasn’t come bursting through the door, I assume you didn’t text her?”

I shrug and try to sound nonchalant. “Tristan had everything under control.”

That gets me a smile from Pierce and an approving nod from Helen. “Barale blood always tells,” she comments.

“My mother is a Stewart.” I don’t know what else to say, but it just seems to notch me higher in Helen’s esteem.

“Adam and I are going to catch up,” Adrian interjects before I can say any other stupid things. “We’ll be right over there.” He gestures toward the

wall about four metres away. For some reason, it’s an area clear of other people. Helen glances over, then nods.

“Stay within sight.”

Adrian doesn’t bother to reply, just steers me away.

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Chapter 25

We stop beside one of the speakers set up to play music, and he lets me go and turns to face me.

"If we keep our voices down and stay right beside the speaker, nobody will be able to hear us," he murmurs. "Ambient noise plays havoc with vampire hearing."

"Thanks for the tip." I file that away for future reference. Adrian might already be beating Cat in the most useful cousin contest.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"Yeah. I mean, I think I sweated through my deodorant, but I didn't shit myself, so it's all good."

"Don't know that I'd be able to say the same if I'd been in your shoes. Do you understand what happened? Cat said you're still learning." He shakes his head. "Nan's so fucking pissed at her for dropping you in the shit like this without proper instruction."

The urge to leap to Cat's defence is sudden and surprising. "I needed the money," I explain. "I don't think she planned for things to go exactly the way they did."

Adrian's mouth twitches into a smile. "You didn't even grow up with us and you still keep cousins' law."

"Cousins' law?"

"We stick together. We can beat the shit out of each other—and we did—but it's us against the adults and everyone else."

Oh. That sounds… fucked-up. But nice? I spend a second wistfully imagining what my childhood might have been like with a bunch of cousins

to get into trouble with. I understand why my parents made the decision they did—especially after tonight's drama—but maybe I'm not ready yet to forgive them for denying me the rest of my family.

"Do you think anyone else would want to meet up while I'm here?" I try not to sound like his answer matters.

"Nan will kill me if I don't set it up," he replies instantly. "She called me earlier—she knew you'd be here before I did. Dinner tomorrow night, if Tristan doesn't need you. Or anytime that works for you."

It's probably dumb for me to be this excited about dinner with an old lady, but I've never had a grandmother before. "I'll check, but tomorrow should be okay. Can I text you when I know for sure?"

He pulls out his phone, and we exchange numbers. "Text me anytime," he says. "Do you want to wait until you've met everyone before you join the group chats?"

"There are group chats?"

"Yeah. Cat wanted to add you to them before, but you didn't know about…" He gestures to encapsulate the room full of vampires and the massive fucking secret of their existence.

I nod. "Fair call." Considering how I felt about Cat when we first met and my general ambivalence at the time toward my extended family, I probably wouldn't have even wanted to join. "Let's wait until I've met people," I say. "I'd rather have faces to put names to."

"Works for me." His eyes flick over my shoulder. "Tristan's back."

I half turn and scan the room. My vampire's looking right at me, and I give him a half smile, hoping he won't want me to rejoin him right away. I need a tiny bit of distance after seeing the hand that holds my arm for feeding twice a day covered in gore from digging his fingers into another living being's throat.

Tristan nods, then turns to speak to a small cluster of vampires beside him. Guess I'm free to keep talking to Adrian.

"Do you have any questions I can answer for you?" Adrian asks.

"So many," I say honestly. "Like, what was the deal with Misha tonight? That was a setup, right? He wasn't even fighting back."

My cousin flinches and glances around. "Quietly," he reminds me.

I pull an apologetic face. "Sorry."

He grabs my arm and leads me along the wall to a door. We go through, then down a short corridor and through another door that leads outside to a

lit-up pool area. “You’re right,” he says, “but here isn’t the place for a conversation about that. Tristan handled it.”

“I don’t understand why Misha would show his hand to set up something as trivial as what Geoffrey did tonight.” I mean, he achieved nothing. Even if Tristan hadn’t been on his game, would winning the support of the few vampires who were in the room really have mattered that much?

“Did he show his hand, though? It’s pretty obvious to us that it was a setup, but if you look at the facts of what happened, it could be argued that Geoffrey’s arrival at exactly that moment was just a coincidence.”

“Nah, fuck that.”

“Mate, I agree with you, but everyone knows there’s bad blood between Misha and Tristan. The people who want to maintain neutrality are going to say that what happened tonight was just Misha being his usual self. When this story makes the rounds, most of them won’t even mention that Geoffrey was here.” He shakes his head. “Until Misha himself declares his allegiance, it doesn’t matter that everyone knows where his sympathies lie. He’s always been anti-human and anti-feeder, but he’s strong enough that, as long as he doesn’t cross the line to open, provable insurrection, the Council won’t go after him. Why do you think they recruited Tristan so young?”

The truth slams into me. “They wanted to weaken Misha.”

“And to gain insight into how he thinks and operates. Stay away from Misha, Adam. Tristan can protect you, but he’s got enough on his plate right now without having to worry about you too.”

“I have zero plans to ever be near Misha voluntarily.”

“Good.” He sighs. “Don’t get me wrong, the prestige of you being the regent’s feeder is great for you and the family rep, but I wish you’d ended up with someone else. Someone who has no interest in politics.”

“That would have been easier,” I agree, but the thought is distinctly unappealing. I’ve always been a drama llama. “So,” I change the subject, “what’s with the tension between you and Helen?”

Adrian freezes. “What do you mean?”

“Mate, c’mon. I might have just met you, but the whole two minutes I spent in your vampire’s company was crawling with subtext and angst. Tell me everything.”

He swallows hard. “It’s nothing. It’s…” His eyes dart around the shadowy yard.

“Hey, sorry. You don’t have to tell me. Just know, I can totally be a vault.” I mime zipping my lips and throwing away the key, and he smiles weakly.

“You really can’t tell anyone.”

“I swear.”

“Helen and I have been together for nearly nine years.”

Okay. And… “That’s a long time,” I prompt.

He nods. “My contract—and my career—will be over in fourteen months. It’s hard, because I… we… we’re close.”

“It’s good that you get along with her.”

He’s shaking his head before I even finish the sentence. “No, I mean we’re *close*. Really close.” The significant look he gives me is confus—

“Oh my *god*!” He’s fucking his vampire?

“Shh!”

“Oh my god,” I hiss, even though I kind of get it? The hotness factor is there, and I can’t deny that I’ve wondered what it would be like—usually while I’m thinking about Tristan biting my neck instead of my wrist. I’ve never had a man’s mouth on my neck without it being sexual, so it’s normal for me to connect the two, right? But even when I’ve thought about sex and vampires, I couldn’t get past the *vampire* part. Does that make me a bigot?

The tense look on Adrian’s face tells me that whether I’m a bigot or not, if I want to keep this connection with him, I need to say something that can’t be mistaken for a prayer.

“Sorry, you surprised me. Still learning stuff, remember? I didn’t know that was a thing. What with, you know, the mechanics… like super strength.” I’m talking out of my arse now, but Adrian relaxes and nods.

“Yeah, that’s why for sure you’d only want to be with an older vampire, someone who’s had time to learn their strength and how to control it.”

“Makes sense. Uh, not to be a dick or anything, but do a lot of humans f—hook up with vampires?”

He shrugs. “More than you’d think. It’s not really talked about in feeder families, though, especially not in ones like ours. We’re supposed to be professional, y’know? Fucking isn’t professional. And we’re definitely not supposed to fall in love.” He grimaces, and suddenly I get what the problem is.

“Ohh, and with your contract ending, there’s no official reason for you and Helen to spend time together unless you go public, which the family would disapprove of. That sucks, mate. I know I haven’t met everyone yet, but I’ll totally back you up.”

“Thanks, but it’s not that. Or not just that. The family wouldn’t love it, but they love me and they’d get used to it once they see how happy Helen makes me. The thing is, Helen wants to bond.”

My jaw drops. “That’s a real thing? I thought it was just an urban legend!” I’ve seen bonding mentioned a few times on the Dish, but usually just in passing as a joke. The idea of a human and a vampire willingly and irrevocably joining their lives together isn’t taken seriously by either species—at least not from what I’ve seen. Judging by Adrian’s face, this is another area where I’m woefully undereducated.

“Most people think that,” he admits. “The Council and the Association prefer it that way. But it’s a real thing.”

I scramble to remember what I know about it. “I never really got the details on how it works.”

He shrugs. “You know why feeders can only have a ten-year career, yeah?”

“Because vampire saliva enzymes cause too much blood production over time and it’s dangerous.”

With a wry smile, he shakes his head. “Nope. I mean, yeah, blood production increases and if you’re not being fed on regularly, that becomes a problem, but that’s not the reason. Before the concept of feeders was formalised, vampires often used to keep human ‘feeder companions.’ The Council outlawed it at the same time they brought in the feeder laws.”

“Why?”

“Control, I guess. A lot of younger vampires and most feeders don’t even know about it. I only know because we have a bunch of old diaries by the first feeders from our family. Well, copies of diaries—I think the originals are still with the Italian branch of the family, but someone copied them out a couple hundred years ago, and we have those.”

I shake my head, trying to get everything straight. “So the whole thing about it being dangerous to feed a vampire for more than ten years is, what? Propaganda?”

Adrian nods. “Basically. When a vampire feeds from a human over a long period, the human’s body gains the same ability to self-heal that a

vampire's has. They stop aging."

"You're fucking joking." But why would the Council want to keep that a secret? I've heard a whole bunch this past month about the feeder shortage, about how hard it is for some of the younger vampires to afford to keep their feeders. If feeders—and humans in general—knew they could stop aging, they'd be signing up at the drop of a hat and probably be willing to work for lower wages.

Not me, though. I'm okay with getting older if I'll have the money Tristan's paying me when I do.

"No joke. The other thing that long-term feeding does is forge a connection between the vampire and the human. It's where the 'myths' about human servants come from—humans who become extensions of the vampire, like zombies." He sees my expression and chuckles. "Nah, that's not real. The connection is, but it's not a control thing. A human bonded to a vampire gains better sensory abilities and speed. There's anecdotal evidence of both the vampire and human being able to sense things like whether the other is in pain or sleeping, but nothing that was ever proved." He swallows. "The downside is that after a certain amount of time, both vampire and human form a symbiotic bond through blood and saliva enzymes. The vampire is unable to gain nutrition by feeding on anyone else, and the human can't be fed on by any other vampire. It's incredibly painful if they try, but if they don't, the overproduction of blood kills them."

My mind is reeling. "And that's what Helen wants to do? Only feed on you forever?"

He nods. "I want it too. Or at least, I don't want her to feed on anyone else. You're a feeder; you know how intimate it is. I know it wouldn't be the same as it is between us when she feeds on someone else, but…"

"What's holding you back?" I'm way out of my depth in this conversation, but Adrian's trusting me with a lot here, and I'm going to do my best to help no matter what.

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Chapter 26

"Bonding's not legal without special dispensation from the Council. They couldn't outlaw it completely, because a lot of the old vampires at the time the feeder laws were introduced were bonded to humans and wouldn't have agreed to help enforce the laws if exceptions weren't made. So they buried a sub-sub-sub clause in the law where nobody would look for it, stating that vampires and humans who want to bond need to apply for permission."

"Has that ever happened?"

Adrian shakes his head. "Not that Helen and I are aware of." He hesitates. "Or Tristan."

"Tristan knows about this?" So that's what all the subtext was in his and Helen's little exchange.

"He's the regent. For us to have any chance of getting permission, we'd need his support. Plus, he and Helen have been friends for a long time. They were made within a couple of years of each other. He thinks it's a bad idea."

Indignation rises hotly in me. "What the fuck would he know? If this is something you want, don't let his opinion discourage you." I mentally add "have words with Tristan" to my to-do list.

Adrian smiles faintly. "It's not just his opinion that worries me. If Helen and I apply to the Council, we're signing up for a lifetime of having them watch us. No matter what they decide—and let's face it, the chances of them saying yes are slim—we'll be on their watchlist. Plus, there's no way of keeping anything secret. Everyone knows that the best way to let the whole world know something is to send a confidential message to the

Council. We'll lose our privacy, and knowing people the way I do, a lot of them are going to be very uncool. I'm not sure I'm ready for a life in the spotlight—or to be ostracised."

Fuck. "I hate this for you."

"Thanks. Me too." He shakes his head. "Come on, we've been out here too long. I'm surprised Tristan and Helen haven't come looking for us."

I snort. "They mustn't have noticed we're gone." I grab the door handle and hold it open for him to go in, but a scuffling sound distracts me before I can follow. Frowning—I hope nobody overheard Adrian's secret—I glance around, but there's nobody there. A possum, maybe, and they don't tell secrets.

Relieved, I turn to go inside and nearly run into the vampire standing in the doorway.

"Fuck!" Stumbling, I scramble back a few paces, putting myself out of arm's reach, and my blood runs cold when the vampire laughs softly.

"Such language. Does Tristan know you have a potty mouth? I can't believe he allows it." His words are light, but his eyes are cold. I recognise him as the vampire who stopped Geoffrey from attacking Tristan, but I'm not stupid enough to think that means I'm safe with him. The fact that he's talking to another vampire's feeder *and* blocking the door is a pretty big clue that I'm not.

"I was startled. Please let me through." I keep my voice steady, but my heartbeat has picked up speed, and there's no way he missed that.

He grins, flashing fang. "Ah, but this is my chance to talk to a Barale. I've heard so many interesting things about your family." His gaze drops to my neck. "I wonder, do you really taste as good as they say?"

Despite my resolution to stand my ground, I take a step back.

"Don't run away," he whispers. Over his shoulder, I see Adrian, eyes wide in his terrified face, and then he's gone. "Maybe I'll take a little taste."

That's the only warning I have before he's on me, vampire speed giving me no chance to run or do more than get my forearms up. I barely hold him off, kicking desperately, but I know I have only seconds before his fangs are in my throat. Distantly, I regret that I never asked Tristan to bite me there—at least then I'd know what it should be like. If I survive this, I don't think I'll ever want to be bitten there again. His breath is hot on my skin as he bends his head toward me, and I redouble my efforts to shove him away, twisting and kicking—

I stagger off balance as the weight of my attacker disappears. Gasping, I spin toward the sound of growling, expecting to see Tristan and shocked to see Misha instead. He's holding the other vampire up by the throat, and I semi-hysterically wonder if Tristan learned to do that from his sire.

A second later, Misha adjusts to a two-handed hold and snaps the vampire's neck. He falls limply to the pavers, and the tall blond's eyes lock onto me.

I should have run while I had the chance.

"Such a reckless little bird," Misha says, so low I almost don't hear him, and then he moves, faster than my eyes can register. I blink, and he and the other vampire are gone.

The door bursts open behind me, and I whirl around, but this time it's Tristan. My knees give way with relief.

"Where is he?"

I open my mouth to tell him, but the sight of others spilling through the door behind him freezes the words in my throat. Helen, Adrian, and Pierce, I think we can trust, but Paul and Selene have already shown that they prefer to play the middle, and as for the rest… If I say that Misha rescued me, it might undermine the work Tristan's doing. For all I know, this is another setup. It's not like vampires can die from a broken neck—full decapitation, removal of the heart, or burning to ash are the only ways to make sure they're dead. Maybe Misha and his friend cooked this up to gain some sympathy for Misha and the whole anti-feeder cause.

"He left," I croak. "He heard you coming."

There's a murmur of what sounds like disappointment from the assembled vampires—fucking jackals—and then Tristan is beside me, his arm coming around my shoulders. His other hand rises to adjust my jacket, and I realise it's torn, the sleeve practically hanging off my arm.

"I believe that's enough for one night. Pierce, please call Anna and have her meet us out the front." Pierce's phone is in his hand before the sentence is complete. "Selene, Paul, thank you for your hospitality. Unfortunately, we must cut the evening short."

Selene's face is sickly pale as she shakes her head frantically. "Our deepest regrets, Tristan. We had no… That any civilised vampire would attack a feeder… It's unacceptable. We regret that such a heinous thing happened in our home."

“We offer recompense to you and your feeder,” Paul adds. Both of them carefully avoid looking at me. “Would he like to lie down, or a hot drink? I can send for a doctor.”

“I’m taking him home,” Tristan says firmly. “Perhaps in future, you’ll give more care to your guest list.” With his arm still securely around me, he steers me toward the corner of the house and then along the side until we emerge onto the forecourt. Pierce overtakes us there, heading for the front gate, but Helen and Adrian stop beside us.

“Are you okay, Adam?” my cousin asks, worry creasing his brow. “I’m so sorry. We shouldn’t have gone outside alone. I—”

“Not your fault,” I interrupt. “I’m fine, just… shaken.” Shocked. Terrified. Not sure if the adrenaline will ever leave my system. “I’ll call you tomorrow to confirm our plans.”

He nods, swallowing. “You can call me anytime.”

“Tristan,” Pierce calls, and we glance over to see that Anna’s pulled the car into the driveway.

“You have my support, Tristan,” Helen says, her voice low. “Attacking a feeder is beyond the pale.”

“He wanted to taste Barale blood,” I mutter inconsequentially. My mouth just wants something to do.

Tristan’s body goes stiff against mine, and Helen sucks in a breath. “I’ll make some calls,” she promises. “No vampire who’s ever contracted with a Barale will tolerate this.”

“Granddad’s going to shit a brick,” Adrian adds, and I blink, startled.

Then Tristan is sweeping me away across the forecourt, and I’m being buckled into the back seat of the car. Anna’s face is equal parts worried and furious, but she says nothing, just backs out of the driveway and speeds off.

My hand slides across the seat, searching for Tristan’s arm. I need the contact, but I’m still surprised when he grips my hand firmly in his.



TRISTAN CALLS for Clive as soon as we enter the house from the garage, and we haven’t even reached the kitchen when he appears in the doorway. His eyes go wide as they take us in—Tristan with his bloodstained clothes and me with my torn suit.

“Does he need a hospital?” Clive demands of Tristan.

“I don’t know but would appreciate if you could ascertain that.”

I pull away from him and go slump into one of the chairs at the big table. “I don’t need a hospital.” I’m pretty sure, though now that the adrenaline is starting to fade, I have some sore spots where the vampire grabbed me. Bruises, probably. My shoulder aches too, but not badly. I might have wrenched it a little in the scuffle. “I’m fine.”

Lauren appears in the opening to the living room as the words leave my mouth, and she gasps. Not exactly encouraging. “What happened?”

“I’d like to know the exact details also,” Anna says, coming to sit opposite me. “Clive will check you over. He’s got paramedic training.” She doesn’t even pretend it’s not an order, and with Tristan standing a few feet away like a grim guardian, I don’t try to argue. Clive carries a metal toolbox thing over to the table and reaches for my wrist, and to show that I’m cooperating, I push my sleeve up so he has access to check my pulse.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” Lauren says. “Tea for everyone?”

“Coffee, please.” I smile at her. She smiles back, then turns a questioning glance to Clive.

“He’ll have chamomile tea,” Clive tells her.

“Chamomile!” I’m not ninety, for fuck’s sake.

“No coffee until your heart rate is back to normal,” the fun police declares, then pulls a mini torch out of his toolbox. “Follow the light with your eyes.”

Like a good boy, I follow all his instructions, standing up when I’m told to and pointing out all the spots that are sore, and finally he concedes that I don’t need medical attention. He packs up his toolbox as Lauren brings a tray of steaming mugs over to the table.

“Take these and have a hot bath with Epsom salts before bed,” he orders, passing me a packet of Nurofen.

“Can I have a shower instead? I don’t like baths.” I pop two caplets out of the blister pack to prove I’m not trying to be difficult, even though I kind of am. A bath sounds pretty good right now.

The glare Clive gives me says he knows exactly what I’m doing, and I smile angelically in return.

“You’ll have the bath,” Tristan interjects, coming to sit at the head of the table, two places away from me. “Drink your tea and tell us exactly what happened. Leave nothing out.”

I take a sip from my mug and am surprised by the nostalgic comfort the subtle chamomile flavour gives. I guess those times my dad made it for me when I was home from school sick have stuck with me.

“Adrian and I were talking,” I start, choosing my words carefully. There’s no way I’m betraying my cousin’s confidence, but he did say Tristan already knows about him and Helen, so… “It’s been a while since we caught up, and he had some personal news to share.” I meet Tristan’s gaze, and he gives me a barely perceptible nod. Okay, he gets it. “We didn’t want to be overheard, so we went out to the pool area.”

Anna’s sigh is barely audible over Clive’s grumble, and I wince. “Yeah, I know. We shouldn’t have. But in our defence, we didn’t think anyone would be stupid enough to attack two contracted feeders with their vampires only a room away.”

“A vampire attacked you?” Lauren asks incredulously. “I didn’t think it was that kind of party.”

“It wasn’t,” Pierce says. Tristan just sits with his face set and his eyes on me.

“We were on our way inside when he… I don’t even know his name,” I realise. “The vampire. He was with Geoffrey earlier.”

“Geoffrey was there?” Anna shakes her head. “You should have texted me the second he walked in.”

“I was going to, but it didn’t seem like a priority at the time,” I tell her, remembering that fraught moment between Tristan and Misha. “Anyway, the vampire… Did Adrian say who he was?” I ask Tristan.

“Steven.”

Clive sucks in a breath, but when I glance over, he says nothing. I guess I’m not the only one keeping secrets.

“Right, so Adrian and I were on our way inside, and Steven got between us, blocking me from the door.” I shake my head, fear rising again. “I didn’t even know he was nearby. I didn’t see him move, and I didn’t have time to get away. He said he’d heard interesting things about my family and that he wanted a taste.” My hands are shaking, and I put my mug down before I spill my tea. “I tried to hold him off, but he…” I don’t need to finish. They all know he was stronger than me. He’s a vampire, after all.

“Did you see which way he went when he heard us coming?” Pierce asks. “Did he say anything before he left?”

Oh. Fuck. I forgot they don’t know. “That’s not what happened,” I admit, and Tristan sits forward sharply, reaching for my neck.

I flinch, and he freezes, hand outstretched.

“Sorry,” I mutter. “Uh, reflex. You can touch me.”

He lowers his hand. “Did he bite you?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I didn’t want everyone to know in case it became political. Misha pulled him off me.”

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Chapter 27

The jumble of exclaimed words that follows my statement is overwhelming, and I pick up my mug and take a gulp.

"Enough," Tristan orders, and even though he didn't raise his voice, everyone falls silent. "Misha was there the whole time?"

"No— Well… I didn't see him at first. I don't know. All I know is that I was sure Steven was about to bite me, and then he was gone. When I looked around, Misha had him, and then he broke his neck and left. I think he heard you coming, because you came outside a second later." I leave out the part where Misha talked to me. He didn't say anything relevant, and it's not worth pissing off Tristan.

Tristan nods slowly, then gets to his feet. "Sleep in tomorrow. I would prefer you don't leave the house until I find Steven, but your family is welcome to visit you here."

That would be awkward as fuck, but I can't think of an excuse right now. It can be a problem for future Adam. "Thank you."

He's halfway to the living room, Pierce on his heels, when he stops and turns back. "I appreciate you not mentioning Misha's presence to the whole party."

I shrug, trying not to wince when my shoulder protests. "He'd already set up one scene. I thought maybe he and Steven plotted another one. It just seemed better not to mention him."

He nods. "That was clever thinking."

He and Pierce leave while I'm still blinking in shock over the praise.

“Misha set up a scene?” Anna asks. “What the fuck happened? This party was supposed to be low-key!”

Shaking my head, I finish my tea. “Trust me, low-key was never on the table.” I launch into recounting the events of the night from the moment we walked into the house. “I kept thinking I should call you,” I tell Anna as Clive gets up from the table, “but it never seemed to be a good time to take my eyes off the people around me.”

She runs her hand through her mullet. “There’s nothing I could have done about Misha,” she admits. “Not without bringing a shitstorm down on Tristan. And I never would have got there in time to save you from Steven.” She bites her lip. “But we need to come up with a better way for you to reach me than just calling. I’ll make some calls in the morning. How do you feel about wearing a smartwatch?”

I shrug, then stare as Clive puts a plate with a huge piece of cake on it in front of me. “What’s this?” It looks like—

“Stroopwafel cake,” he says, passing plates to everyone else. “With caramel icing.”

My mouth waters, and I pick up the cake fork, not even bothering to tease him about the fact that he stocks the kitchen with cake forks. “Thanks! This is my favourite.” I shovel in a big mouthful and moan. Bless the person who first invented caramel.

Anna eats her cake in record time and disappears shortly after, muttering about research, but Lauren and Clive linger while I eat a second slice, and then Clive shoos me up to my bedroom with a reminder to have a hot bath. I obey, but only because I’m starting to feel some aches and pains in muscles I hadn’t even known were affected.

It’s not until much later, when I’m lying in bed, the house silent around me, that I begin to truly feel the impact of the night’s events. I’m not afraid of the dark, or that something might linger in the shadows. I’m not even afraid that Steven might try to come after me again.

No, the thing that keeps me from closing my eyes is the memory of the fear that choked me when Tristan reached for me.

Despite all the surprises and people being thrown around, this job is the best one I’ve ever had, without question, even if I wasn’t being paid a fantastic wage. I love the people—even Clive—and the sense of community I’ve gotten from every non-vampire I’ve met. Some of the vampires, too. I don’t want to lose this, but if I can’t handle being fed from…

I'm sure it will be fine. I've never had any problem with Tristan feeding from me before. I *trust* Tristan. It's not like Steven actually bit me, so it's probably going to be fine.

Right?

I stare into the darkness for another half hour before sighing and tossing back the covers. There's no way I'm going to sleep with this weighing on me, so I might as well be productive.

Not bothering to turn on the light, I creep out of my room and along the landing past Anna's room, then Clive's. The main staircase leads down, but opposite it are six steps leading up to another tiny landing, and from there I have the choice of five steps down to the hallway that runs to the rooms over the garage, or up another flight.

I go up.

It's an old house, but just like at Blackwood Place, floorboards don't dare to flout Clive's will by creaking. My bare feet are almost silent on the steps, and I'm nearly to the top when it occurs to me that I should probably make it clear I'm not trying to sneak in. The last thing tonight needs is me being jumped because someone thought I was an intruder. I pause and clear my throat softly. "Tristan?"

A few seconds later, light floods the landing at the top of the stairs, and a figure appears. With me standing a few steps down, he's taller than me, and even though I can't see his eyes in the shadows, I know he's studying me with that cool gaze.

"Is something wrong?" he asks, and I shake my head, then nod.

"Can I come in?" It's colder than I thought it would be, standing around in my flannel pj pants. My fault for not putting on a shirt.

For a moment, Tristan doesn't say anything, and I strain to see his face. Then he steps back. "Come on."

I scramble up the rest of the steps and walk past him into his bedroom. Three lamps light the space, and two sets of french doors lead out onto a rooftop terrace. I bet he's got a view of the harbour.

The king-size bed is undisturbed, and I wonder why he even has it. Does he like to sleep sometimes, even though he doesn't need to? Or is it for other… stuff? I jerk my attention away, feeling my face get hot, and turn toward the plush blue velvet couch. A small stack of papers sits on one cushion, and the side table at one end holds a half-empty wineglass.

“Are you working?” I blurt. “Sorry. I didn’t think I’d be interrupting…” Though of course I would be, since it’s nearly two in the morning. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Sit,” he says, and I can’t tell if it’s an order or an invitation. That’s okay, since I want to sit anyway. I curl up in the corner of the couch, tucking my feet under me. He studies me for a moment, then goes through a door and comes back a moment later with a soft-looking knitted throw. I try to hide my astonishment as he shakes it out, then drapes it over me. “Better?”

I nod. “Thank you.”

He retakes his seat at the other end of the couch, moving the papers to the side table with the wineglass. “Are you worried that if you sleep, something will happen?”

“No.” I weave a corner of the blanket between my fingers, trying to gather the courage to say the right words. “He was going to bite me. Take my blood without my permission.”

Tristan’s gaze is steady on my face. “Yes.”

“It was terrifying.” I unwrap the blanket from my hand, then rewrap, glad that he’s not rushing to fill the silence with reassuring promises. “I’ve never been afraid when you bite me, but this was different. I don’t think he was going to be… careful.”

He says nothing. We both know I’m right. A vampire who’d feed without consent, who’d bite another vampire’s feeder… the chances of me being left alive were always slim. There was no way he was going to take care to minimise the damage from his bite.

“In my head, before, feeding was never a bad thing. It wasn’t an attack.”

His expression changes almost imperceptibly, but I know he understands where this is going.

“I don’t want that to change. I don’t want a bite to be a scary thing, but I’m worried that it will be.” I take a deep breath. “I can’t sleep, thinking about it.”

“You want to know now?”

I nod.

“You must say the words, Adam. I need your verbal consent.”

The biggest part of my worry lifts away, reassured by his insistence on giving me control of this interaction. To satisfy the lingering remnants, I ask, “Will you feed, Tristan? Please bite me.”

His lashes sweep down in a ridiculously long blink, shielding his eyes from me, but when they rise, his composure is undisturbed. “Are you sure? The stress of the evening—”

“The stress is what I’m trying to get rid of,” I interrupt. “I want to go back to bed and sleep secure in the knowledge that that fucker was just a nasty blip in my life, and tomorrow I can get up and do all the things I’m used to doing. I can’t do that until I know that feeding doesn’t scare me.”

His mouth presses into a thin line. “You will tell me to stop if you feel even the smallest trepidation.”

“Trepidation,” I repeat, and a grin takes over my face. “Only you could unironically use a word like that in a sentence.”

“Adam.”

“Fine, I’ll tell you to stop if I feel any ‘trepidation.’” I let go of the blanket so I can make air quotes with my fingers. “I promise.”

Wordlessly, he holds out his hand for me to give him my wrist. I bite my lip.

“Actually…” When I hesitate, he drops his hand.

“There’s no rush for you to try feeding again,” he assures me. “I’ll be fine for another day or two, and then I can request a temp if necessary.”

Possessive irritation surges in me. He’s *my* vampire, and I can keep him fed, thank you very much. “No fucking way. But, uh, no, that’s not… I was actually wondering if you could, uh… bite my… neck.”

This time the change in his expression is unmistakable. His eyes darken, dropping to my throat, and his nostrils flare. He swallows hard, lips parting just enough for me to catch a flash of fang.

“The first time that happens should not be to prove something,” he rasps, but his gaze never leaves my neck. I wonder if he can see the thrum of my heartbeat there.

I shrug lightly. “I’ve been curious, but we don’t know each other that well yet, so I figured it would be better to wait. And then, tonight, I thought I’d lost my chance to experience it the way it should be.” I pause, and when his eyes rise to meet mine, I add, “I don’t want to wait anymore.”

The stillness of the night has nothing on Tristan as he wrestles with his conscience. I see it, the moment when he loses to his vampire instincts. He takes a shaky breath.

“You’ll stop me if—”

“Yes. I’ll stop you.” I’m totally not stopping him unless I’m so scared I’m on the verge of pissing myself.

He nods. “Very well.”

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Chapter 28

"Kneel beside me," he orders, giving the velvet upholstery beside his thigh a single pat.

I push aside my blanket, not needing it with the thrill of anticipation warming me, and eye the spot dubiously. "Wouldn't it be better logistically if I sit?" Me kneeling while he stays sitting is going to make the angle awkward.

He shakes his head, his black curls, loosened from their usual strict style, bouncing against his brow. "You're less likely to get nervous if you have leverage and a height advantage."

I scoff and roll my eyes. "Mate, I already have a height advantage, and it doesn't matter how much leverage you give me. If you want to take control, I don't stand a chance. I know that. The whole point is, I trust you not to."

The words ring through the air with a depth of meaning I didn't intend to give them. At least, I don't think I did. They're true, though. I do trust Tristan, whatever that means. He might be a vampire, and sure, there are times he's fucking terrifying, but he's never hurt me, and he goes out of his way to make sure I feel safe when he's feeding. Maybe I shouldn't trust him with everything, but I'm confident I can trust him with this.

He shakes his head. "I appreciate that, but I—"

"Fine." I don't want to waste more time on this. I slide across the couch and get onto my knees, then sit back on my heels. It makes the height difference between us more pronounced and puts his face level with my throat.

My pulse speeds up.

He turns sideways, angling himself so he can better reach me. “Are you ready?” His warm breath ghosts over my skin.

“Yes,” I croak, pushing down every atom of fear. I want this. I *need* this. “I’m r—ahh…”

His fangs pierce my neck, and my whole body shudders, the sensation somehow sharper than in my wrist. Then he begins to suck, and I gasp.

Cat was right. This is more intimate—way more intimate. Even though his hands aren’t touching me, our bodies are so much closer than usual, his face pressed into the sensitive skin of my throat, and every suck stirs sensations I normally associate with a different activity. My dick is getting hard, but I don’t care. Impulsively, I lift my hands to cradle his head against me and move to straddle his legs. Tristan makes a sound—half surprise, half protest—but doesn’t stop.

I sit astride his lap, panting as he draws the blood from my veins, barely resisting the urge to hump against him. This was a mistake.

This is the best experience of my life.

Too soon—far sooner than usual—he slows, and then his fangs slide from my body and his tongue laves my tender skin. Shaky breaths wheeze from me as I let go of his head, and he tips it back to meet my gaze.

His lips are stained with my blood.

I’m kissing him before I know it, lightly, a mere touch of my mouth to his. It’s not sexual—it’s not—but it is. How can it not be? I’ve been more intimate with him, this vampire who is sustained by my life’s blood, than with any other man. It’s only right that we share this too.

I taste myself on him, and while I’ll never hunger for the flavour of blood, it’s not unpleasant. Is that the Barale element or the fact that it’s Tristan I’m kissing? The kiss deepens—I deepen it—as I slide my tongue between his lips, wanting more, wanting—

Fang.

That’s a fang.

Reality crashes into me, and I jerk back, scrambling off his lap. Too late, I realise that his hands are still by his sides. He never touched me, never tried to prolong our contact—never responded to our kiss.

“I-I-I’m sorry,” I stutter. What have I done? This was supposed to save my career, not hasten its end. Desperately, I try to remember if our contract had anything in it about sexual harassment. It must have… right?

“Go to bed,” Tristan orders softly, not moving from the couch. I hesitate, wanting to apologise again, wanting assurances that I haven’t fucked everything up, but in the end, I go.

It’s not until I’m back in my own bed, huddled under the covers, that I press my fingers to my neck and let myself remember how it felt to have Tristan’s mouth there.

And wonder if I’ll ever feel it again.



IT’S LATE when I wake, the light filtering around the curtains strong. I can hear distant sounds from the street and downstairs, and I stretch, wondering if this is the last time I’ll wake up as a feeder. Maybe I can get a contract with someone else if Tristan fires me? I cringe. Being known as the feeder Tristan got rid of won’t do good things for my reputation.

Sitting up, I check the time and see it’s just after ten. There’s a message waiting for me from Adrian, and I open it, expecting him to be checking on me after last night, maybe asking for me to confirm dinner plans.

ADRIAN:

I’m impressed. Tristan works fast.

I blink rapidly a few times. How did he know? And should I correct him, tell him it was all me, that Tristan didn’t…

No, wait. There’s no way Adrian can know I kissed Tristan last night, not unless Tristan himself is telling people, which he wouldn’t do. This is something else. Something Adrian thinks I know about.

I get out of bed, duck into the bathroom to piss and brush my teeth, then put on yesterday’s jeans and a hoodie, carefully avoiding the remnants of my new suit. The pants should be fine, and maybe the jacket can be repaired, but I’d rather not ever wear it again. I’ll ask Clive to get rid of it for me.

Downstairs, I don’t hear Tristan and Pierce in the office at the front of the house. Maybe they’ve gone out? I go through the living room and into the kitchen—

And stop short.

“Are we having a meeting?” It’s the only reason I can think of for everyone to be sitting at the table like this. Oh, wait—Lauren’s not here. She has uni this morning, though, so maybe the meeting didn’t get called until after she left.

That still leaves me in the dark.

“Good morning,” Anna says as Clive gets up. “Come and join us.”

“Uhh—”

“Eggs for breakfast?” Clive asks, pushing buttons on the coffee machine.

“Toast is fine,” I say, because I get the feeling there’s important stuff going on. It’s pointless, though, because the look he gives me as he brings me my coffee says that he’d rather die than serve only toast. “Eggs are fine,” I concede weakly.

He starts getting out ingredients as I take my first sip of life-giving elixir. “So… what’s going on?”

Anna and Pierce exchange a look, but it’s Tristan who says, “The remains of Steven’s body were found early this morning.”

I choke on my coffee. “What?” I wheeze. My plan to avoid looking at him fails, but there’s nothing in his face that reflects what happened last night.

“He’d been decapitated,” Anna adds. “His body was burned to ash, and his head was left in the middle of the pile.”

Holy *fuck*. All thoughts of that foolish kiss race out of my head. “Where? Who?”

“In Paul and Selene’s backyard, and we don’t know.”

I slump down in my chair. “In their backyard? That’s… Someone’s making it about me?” Why else would he have been left there? He wasn’t killed there… was he? Did Misha stash him somewhere nearby, then come back to finish the job before he had a chance to heal?

“I believe they’re making it about me,” Tristan corrects. “Especially since a visit to Steven’s lodgings this morning produced a stash of trinkets and other small items that belong to the humans who’ve been attacked recently.”

I gulp down my coffee, trying to make sense of it all. “So either Steven did it, or he’s being used to take the fall now that he’s dead… and his death is being pinned on you? Which could also mean that they’re still trying to frame you, because if you killed him, you could also have planted the stuff

at his place.” Fuck, this is complicated. Mustering my courage, I venture, “Did you kill him?”

The moment before he answers seems to stretch into eternity. Under vampire law, what Steven did to me gives Tristan the right to kill him. Not only the right, but the obligation. Failure to do so would be sending a message to the whole vampire world that he’s weak, and more, doesn’t value me or feeders in general. Steven’s death was a foregone conclusion from the moment he touched me; the surprise is that it’s happened already and the anonymity around it. Maybe another vampire would have slipped off in the night and left the remains of their hunt set up like a museum display, but not Tristan. He takes his position as regent seriously, and he’d have carried out the whole process of retribution publicly. Maybe even to the point of a challenge and fight in front of witnesses. That’s why I don’t believe Tristan killed Steven… but it’s possible I don’t know him as well as I think I do.

“No,” Tristan says. “My evening was taken up by other pursuits.”

My neck and face go hot as I vividly remember what those other pursuits were. There’s nothing in his statement or expression that suggests I was rubbing myself all over him just eight hours ago, but it feels so obvious to me.

“What do we do now?” Anna asks, and I’m grateful for the reprieve when Tristan looks away from me.

“Your priority remains the same,” he tells her. “Until we confirm who killed Steven and why, Adam’s safety is paramount.”

“Isn’t it obvious who killed him?” I smile gratefully at Clive as he puts a plate of scrambled eggs, toast, and sliced avocado in front of me. I’m pretty sure he stalked my Insta, because I swear he’s made me every food I’ve ever posted and raved about. That makes me feel a bit bad about giving him a hard time, but I also think he’d get mad if I was nice to him. Clive and I have our own special system of communication. “Geoffrey and Misha did. Geoffrey’s going to blame Steven for all the attacks and act like he knew nothing about any of it.” I fork up a big chunk of fluffy eggs.

“That’s possible,” Pierce muses. “Even if it wasn’t he who killed Steven, he’ll likely take advantage of this opportunity.”

Anna pulls a face. “Doesn’t it contradict his claims that Tristan is behind the attacks and trying to frame Vam—uh, Blood Reign?”

“That only works in his favour,” Pierce counters while I apply myself to my breakfast. Last night’s scare and extra feeding have left me ravenous. “Steven being found ‘obviously guilty’ when Geoffrey has been shouting that it was Tristan responsible gives legs to the idea that it couldn’t have been Geoffrey behind it all.”

With my mouth full, I exchange a glance with Anna. This is getting way too convoluted.

“What I don’t understand is where Misha connects to all this,” Pierce continues. “He could easily have killed Steven—likely did—but was Steven’s attack on Adam part of the plan? Or did he go off-script and prove to be a liability?”

I swallow. “If it was part of the plan, then what was the goal? For me to tell everyone that Misha saved me and show him in a good light? Why didn’t Geoffrey save me, then? Misha hasn’t even officially aligned himself with Vampremacy.”

Tristan shakes his head. “Nobody would believe Geoffrey would save a feeder, or any human, without ulterior motive. He’s made his feelings on the subject of humans very clear.”

“So has Misha,” Clive points out, surprising me. He doesn’t often join in conversations like this, and he never challenges Tristan.

“Perhaps, but he respects the claim of vampire ownership. Adam is mine. Misha might test boundaries by speaking to him, but if he wanted to challenge me, he would do so directly rather than by attacking my humans. He would see the attack on Adam as somewhat akin to kicking a dog—the kind of thing any decent person steps in to prevent.”

The previously delicious eggs turn to ash in my mouth. With only a few sentences, Tristan’s made a few things crystal clear.

I’m his possession, and vampires see humans as a lesser species.

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Chapter 29

You'd think with Steven being dead, Tristan's edict from last night that I not leave the house would be lifted, but if anything, the fact that we don't know who killed him or why means there are even more restrictions on me. Tristan rescinded his permission for my family to visit—not that I was going to meet them for the first time under his roof within earshot of people who think I grew up in the bosom of the family, but still. His reasoning is that even though Barales can *of course* be trusted, they're human, and thus vulnerable to vampires. It might not be technically possible for a vampire to fully control a human's mind, but the strongest can implant suggestions that theoretically could make a human do things they usually wouldn't. It's all very unproven and paranoid, but Tristan was on his way out the door when he barked out the order, so I didn't have a chance to argue with him, and there's no way in hell anyone else in this house was going to disobey him and let me sneak out. Besides, he left Pierce behind to guard me, and while teenage me was an expert in sneaking out of the house under my parents' noses, I doubt a vampire would fail to notice me leaving.

I spend what's left of the morning with Anna, practicing the hand-to-hand fighting skills she's been trying to teach me. We go over exactly what happened last night, and although we both know there was no way I could actually have held Steven off, we do come up with a few options that might have helped to slow him down long enough for help to come. The biggest problem in a human vs. vampire situation is their speed. There are ways to combat strength and even use it against an aggressor, but it gets a whole fuck of a lot harder when the aggressor moves so much faster than you can.

Anna also has me practice screaming, which turns out to be more fun than I expected. Pierce bursts into the room so violently that the door crashes *through* the wall, plaster shards and dust flying everywhere. The confusion on his face when he sees that I'm fine and there's nobody in the room except me and Anna makes me bite my lip hard to hold in my laugh.

"Oops," Anna says. "I guess I should have warned you." She meets my gaze, and I'm unable to keep from laughing any longer.

"What are you doing?" Pierce asks in as grumpy a tone as I've ever heard from him while I gasp with laughter and Anna giggles.

"Adam says he never even thought about screaming last night," she explains. "I'm training him to make it a reflex—threat equals scream. If he'd screamed, Tristan could have gotten to him sooner."

Pierce sighs. "This is going to be loud, isn't it?"

After I finish tormenting Pierce and his hearing, I spend an hour getting under Clive's feet, trying to make a viral fudge cake that came up in my feed. He offers three times to make it for me before finally banishing me from the kitchen. The cake was an abject failure, and I'm relieved not to have to clean up the mess I made.

But that leaves me with hours left in the day and nothing to do. All my stuff is at home—I didn't bring much with me because I was supposed to be busy with social shit. The plan was for me to make my official arm candy debut and impress all these Sydney vampires with my Barale-ness while Tristan did his thing.

Sighing, I wander out onto my balcony, assuring myself that it doesn't count as leaving the house (even though I'm pretty sure Tristan would disagree) and call Adrian. I texted him back this morning after getting Tristan's permission to tell him that Steven's death was "unsanctioned." Which is a fancy way of saying Tristan didn't kill him and he was the only one who had a right to.

Adrian doesn't answer, but just as I'm considering if I should call Cat instead, he texts me.

ADRIAN:

Sorry, at meeting with H. T here too.

My brows shoot up. This is my chance to find out what's going on.

ADAM:

What are they talking about?

I wait ages for him to reply before tossing my phone onto the cushion beside me. This outdoor sofa is comfortable, and despite it being winter, it's not truly cold out here. Sydney winters are so much better than Melbourne.

Sliding down so my head is against the cushioned sofa back, I stare out at the sky and finally let my thoughts take over. First and foremost among them is, what the fuck was I thinking last night?

I don't think Tristan is going to sack me. If he was, he'd have said so this morning, wouldn't he? Although he did have a lot on his mind, what with the murder people think he committed and the potential solving of the crimes we came up here to deal with. Still, one way to ensure my safety would have been to sack me, publicly announce it, and then send me back to Melbourne. Right now I'm a target because I'm Tristan's. Geoffrey and Misha couldn't give a crap about me otherwise.

So me still being here is good news for my continued employment. Which leads to the next point—is Tristan so used to having his feeders throw themselves at him that it's not even worth noting? Obviously, feeding is a very intimate activity with a lot of room for lines to blur. I thought, based on what I've read online, that the degrees of intimacy between a vampire and their feeder stopped short of anything sexual or romantic. My chat with Adrian proved I was wrong about that. Could that be why I kissed Tristan? Was it the combination of him feeding from my neck, the adrenaline of the attack, and the discovery that humans and vampires do sometimes have sex?

I can't deny that I'm attracted to him. He's a good-looking man, and the fact that he's so buttoned up and restrained makes me want to mess him up. The idea that I could make him lose control, could make him not care that his hair is untidy and his clothes are a forgotten heap on the floor… that's fucking hot. The power imbalance is another factor. I've always liked dating guys who are older or in charge—or both. Professors at uni, work managers, my dad's boss… it does it for me to know I can bring a powerful man to heel.

Of course, that powerful man has never actually had the power of life or death over me.

Not that it matters. Tristan made it pretty clear last night that he's not interested in me that way. I could test boundaries a bit, flirt and see if I can change his mind—tempt him—but that might end with him changing his mind about keeping me employed.

Also… do I want to cross that line? To become sexually intimate with someone who already thinks of me as something he owns?

My phone chimes with a text, and I snatch it up, eager for the distraction. My brain wants answers to some tough questions, and I'm not prepared to give them. I've only been doing this whole feeder thing—have only known about the existence of vampires—for a *month*, for fuck's sake. I'm allowed to take a bit more time before I make any more life-changing decisions.

ADRIAN:

Looooooong story, negotiations with Vampremacy reopened. T says you can come to dinner tonight if you want.

I wait a few seconds, but that's all, so I send back a yes to dinner and then go downstairs to find Pierce. Maybe he'll know what's going on.



PIERCE KNOWS NOTHING, and we both wait impatiently for Tristan to get back, though in Pierce's case, it's hard to tell. Is the whole constipated-control thing something that comes naturally to vampires, or do they learn how to do it after they've lived for a century?

Tristan doesn't get back until after five, and my plan to eavesdrop while he updates Pierce is thwarted when he chivvies me out the door and into the car. There's a vampire behind the wheel who I vaguely recognise from the party last night, and as Tristan slides into the back seat with me, she turns her head and asks, "Maria Barale's house in Kingsford?"

"Yes," Tristan confirms before I have time to panic. She wasn't talking to me.

"You're coming to my grandparents' house?" I check as the car pulls smoothly into traffic.

"Dropping you off," he corrects. "I'll pick you up later. Your grandmother assured me that the house has adequate security, but for the

next few days I don’t want you travelling without a vampire in attendance.”

“You talked to my grandmother?” Holy hell, the hits keep coming.

He looks at me as though I’ve said something stupid. “Of course.”

I leave that alone, because there are more important things on my mind. “So what happened today? Adrian said negotiations with Vampremacy have reopened.”

Distaste flashes across Tristan’s face. “That name is ridiculous.”

“So are they,” I point out. “We humans don’t have many advantages over vampires, so we have to take our wins where we can.”

He shakes his head. “Negotiations have reopened,” he confirms. “Shortly after I arrived at the DeMartes’ home this morning, Geoffrey called. He claims that after we left the party last night, he went to Steven’s lodgings to confront him, saw the trophies he’d taken from the attack victims, and killed him.”

I squint as I try to reason that out. “Huh?”

“Exactly,” Tristan says dryly.

“Start from the beginning. Why’d he go to confront Steven? Geoffrey doesn’t care if humans get attacked—that’s the whole philosophy of Vampremacy.”

“He doesn’t. In fact, he said that at first he didn’t believe that Steven had attacked you at all, and he went to hear his side of the story. According to Geoffrey, it’s implausible that Steven would have fled when he heard me approaching, especially if he had my feeder in his grasp.” Tristan’s voice is dangerously close to a growl as he finishes, but I’m too busy absorbing what he said to notice… much.

“He didn’t believe Steven attacked me? But—” I stop as Tristan’s gaze slices toward the vampire in the front seat. If Geoffrey thinks I was lying, then Misha didn’t tell him that he saved me. Which means it’s not likely that the whole attack was a plot. Or at least, if it was, Misha saving me wasn’t part of it.

“That bastard,” I say, trying to sound indignant. “As if I’d make up something like that!” Tristan obviously hasn’t mentioned Misha to anyone either, but now I desperately want to know why Misha stepped in. Is it, like Tristan thinks, just because he doesn’t approve of someone harming another vampire’s “possession”? Or is this part of another game, something we don’t know about yet?

“Indeed,” Tristan murmurs, and although it’s not evident in his voice, I see a gleam of amusement in his eyes. “He went to Steven’s lodgings, and although Steven at first denied the attack, when Geoffrey saw the trophies, he guessed Steven was lying and… applied pressure. Steven confessed that he’d attempted to frame me and had attacked you on a whim, and then Geoffrey ‘executed’ him.” He holds my gaze meaningfully for a moment, and then when realisation hits and my eyes widen, he adds, “He apologises on behalf of Blood Reign for Steven’s actions while he was associated with them and denies any knowledge thereof. He also apologised to the DeMartes for leaving Steven’s remains in their garden, claiming that he did so in the heat of the moment.”

My head spins. If Geoffrey had actually spoken to Steven, he would know about Misha. The fact that he doesn’t implies that Steven was already dead when Geoffrey went looking for him—if he even did. The whole part about leaving the head and ashes in the heat of the moment, then coming back hours later all calm and apologetic seems farfetched.

“At least this proves that you’re not connected to the attacks on humans,” I say to keep my end of the conversation up. I would bet real money that Misha killed Steven and left him at the DeMartes’ to muddy the waters. What I don’t know is why.

Or what Geoffrey’s agenda is now.

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Chapter 30

I'm not sure what I was expecting my grandparents to be like. Maybe I had a mental image of an elderly couple who wear wire-framed glasses, conservative yet comfortable clothes, and keep a stash of mints in their pockets. They would dote on their grandkids, not understand how an iPhone works, and possibly need walkers.

I was so wrong.

"Go inside," Tristan orders with a nudge to my back. "I'll collect him at ten."

My grandmother nods. "Thank you, Tristan. We appreciate you bringing him." She reaches out to grab my arm and tow me inside. "Come on, Adam. Dinner's ready."

My grandfather closes the door, then glances through the narrow window beside it. A moment later he says, "He's gone."

"You're the image of your father," my grandmother says. "Except for the eyes. You have your mother's eyes." She shakes her head. "We're so glad to meet you. I'm Maria. Your nan."

"Hi," I manage, suddenly not sure what to say. It doesn't help that she looks like a sixty-something-year-old executive instead of the late-eighties nanna I was expecting. "Um, thanks for inviting me tonight."

"You're always welcome here," my grandfather insists. "I'm Domenic. Your cousins call me Granddad, but I understand if you prefer—"

"Granddad's fine." I've been waiting my whole life for this. "Thanks. Um… This is kind of awkward? But I'm really happy to be here."

They both smile big, and Nan hooks her arm around mine. “Come and meet everyone else. I hope you don’t mind, but we promised your Stewart grandparents that we’d FaceTime them later. They would have come, but they’re in Fiji on holiday this week.”

The living room I’m ushered into is bursting with people and noise, and I’m introduced to a whirlwind of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Some of the names are vaguely familiar, probably from Cat talking about them. I wish I’d listened. Past me was so sure I didn’t care about having family that I screwed myself out of it.

It’s not until we’re sitting down for dinner that talk turns to vampires.

“Forgive me if you’d rather not talk about it,” Cat’s mother says, “but are you okay after last night’s incident?”

The table falls silent as all eyes turn to me. I’m sitting at the “adult” table while most of my cousins are next door at the trestle tables set up in the living room. Adrian is the only one near my age here, which I’m pretty sure was deliberate so I wouldn’t feel too out of place.

“I’m fine,” I assure her. “Just a few bruises.”

She nods, then glances at Granddad. “What are we doing about this?”

“I’ve lodged official complaints with the Association and the regent’s office—though of course, Tristan has already taken action. I also sent messages to the other branches of the family. The ones who’ve already responded have promised to step up if needed.” His eyes narrow. “Nobody attacks a Barale with impunity.”

I make a mental note to double-check what “impunity” means. “Sounds good, but I’m really okay. Tristan’s fucking pissed, and since Steven’s dead, I don’t think kicking up a fuss will get us anywhere.”

“Steven may be dead, but you can’t convince me those cretins at Vampremacy didn’t know what he was up to,” Nan declares, passing a bowl of roast potatoes down the table. “Tristan’s been too lenient with them. He needs to wipe them out, once and for all.”

“First he needs reasonable cause,” I point out, then wonder why I’m defending Tristan when I feel exactly the same way Nan does.

She snorts. “Reasonable cause can be found once they’re dead.”

Adrian elbows me before I can argue that legitimate justice systems don’t work that way. It’s entirely possible that Nan’s been converted to the “kill now, justify later” system of vampire justice.

“Anyway,” Uncle Chris, Adrian’s dad, cuts in, “well done to you, Adam. You didn’t even know vampires existed, and you still bagged the regent. You’re a credit to the family.”

“Uh, thanks? To be honest, I think it’s the family name that sold him on me. Plus, he was kind of desperate. I didn’t exactly make the best first impression.”

Cat’s mum, Aunt Louise, scoffs. “Oh, we know. Catrina ranted about it for ten minutes.”

“Did you really ask about Wi-Fi and tell him you’d wear pyjamas for morning feeds?” her husband asks.

I shrug. “Just setting expectations.”

Most of them break into laughter, but Nan nods approvingly. “Barales have standards.”

Once the tables have been cleared, my cousins descend like a pack of locusts and drag me out to the backyard. There are seven of them—eight if you count Cat, who’s obviously not here—all between the ages of sixteen and thirty. Adrian’s the oldest, and I’m surprised when I figure out that I’m next in age order, with Cat just a few months behind me. What would it have been like if I’d grown up as one of the leaders of this little pack?

As we sit around the firepit, two of the bunch sucking on vapes and the conversation ranging between teasing, bitching about work and school, and gossip about other people in the feeder world, the only word that comes to mind is fun.

It would have been fun.

“Sooooo, Adam,” someone—Megan? Maybe Megan—begins, “tell us something personal.”

“Huh?”

“We don’t know anything about you. Consider it your initiation into the cousins’ gang.”

I know she’s joking because she’s grinning. “Hey, it goes both ways. I don’t know anything about you all, either.” Except Adrian, but based on what he said last night, nobody here knows his big secret. “You go first.”

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. When I was in high school, I—”

A hand clamps over my nose and mouth, and shouts erupt as I’m dragged away from the firepit by arms that feel like steel bands. Shadows close around me, moving dizzyingly fast, and I try to scream like Anna told me, but I can’t breathe.

Blackness rises to take me.



MY FIRST THOUGHT as I drift back to consciousness is that I should have agreed to let Anna microchip me. At least then I could have been sure they'd be able to find me.

I lie still, even though my body is sprawled in an awkward position on what feels like concrete. I definitely have some new bruises, and my limbs are cramped in this position, but the bigger concern is the pain in my head. I think I must have hit it at some point, because there's a hell of a sore spot and an ache radiating from it.

Am I surprised that whoever kidnapped me—a vampire, based on how fast it all happened—didn't lay me gently on a comfortable mattress? No. Am I pissed about it anyway? Fuck, yeah.

Not to mention the concrete I'm lying on is cold, and that cold is seeping through my clothes. I'm going to start shivering in a minute, and whoever's in the room with me will definitely know I'm—

"Ooof!"

My ribs explode with pain as a foot connects with them hard enough to lift my body a bit before it crashes back to the floor in a new uncomfortable sprawl. Biting back a whimper, I pry open my eyes, suck in a deep breath as my head spins, and then moan in pain. If I had to guess, I'd say I have a concussion and cracked ribs.

Fun.

Pushing down nausea, I squint at the figure looming over me. Thankfully, whoever it is doesn't seem inclined to kick me again.

"Finally, you're awake," he grumbles, and for the first time in my life I keep my smart-arsed comments to myself. Geoffrey. Fuck.

I mean, it could be worse. Geoffrey might be a cunt vampire who thinks humans are cattle, but at least he's a young vampire. He won't stand a chance against Tristan, once Tristan works out where I am and comes to get me.

Please let me still be alive by then.

A hand clamps on the back of my neck and drags me to my feet. Geoffrey gets in my face, his sneer revealing his fangs.

“This is what’s going to happen. We’re going to call Tristan, and you’re going to scream. If you don’t, I’ll *make* you. Understand?”

It seems clear to me. “Yes,” I croak. My mouth is so dry that it’s barely audible, but I’m pretty sure that if I try to nod, my head will either fall off or explode. I swallow, trying to work some spit into my mouth so that I can actually scream. I don’t know why he’s not going to “make me” to begin with, but I don’t want to give him any reason to change his mind about that.

Geoffrey doesn’t bother to reply, just pulls out his phone and taps the screen a few times with his thumb. The sound of ringing fills the room.

And continues.

By the third ring, my breath is coming faster.

By the fourth, my gut is churning.

And when the ringing cuts out, replaced by an electronic voice informing us that the person we’re calling is unavailable and to leave a message, I can actually feel the blood draining from my head.

If Tristan knew I was missing—which he must. My family would have called him the second I was taken—he’d be looking for me. He’d have other people searching too, and he’d be answering his phone in hopes of news about me.

Right?

He would. I can’t doubt that, not after how possessive he was last night. Not after all the precautions he’s taken with my safety. Even if he doesn’t care about *me*, he cares about the fact that I’m *his* feeder. Someone successfully kidnapping me makes him look weak, and he wouldn’t stand for that.

So… why isn’t he answering?

Has something happened to him?

Geoffrey snarls and throws his phone across the room, dropping me back to the floor. My knees hit first, creating a new source of pain, but I ignore it and scramble away from the irate vampire, not stopping until I’m huddled against a wall.

He paces off in the opposite direction, muttering to himself, and I take advantage of the opportunity to grope in my pocket for my phone.

It’s not there. Dammit. I guess it was too much to hope that he was stupid enough to leave it. Still, maybe he’s got it nearby. Part of my compromise on the whole “no tracking chip” thing was to give Anna access to track my phone. As long as he didn’t ditch it between my grandparents’

house and here—or turn it off—she'll be able to find me. And even if he did ditch it, or smash it, or whatever, Tristan's coming. I just need to hold on until he gets here.

Where the fuck even is here?

Slowly, not wanting to make the nausea worse—or risk vomiting, which would really mess with my sore ribs—I lift my head and look around. To my surprise, we're not in a warehouse like I assumed. The floor *is* concrete, but it's that posh polished concrete that people have started putting in their ultra-modern houses. Which is what this is. I'm on the floor in what looks like a theatre room, judging by the giant projector screen above my head and the half-dozen or so double recliners across the room. Against one of the side walls is a sideboard with a couple of wine bottles and a few DVDs on top. The walls and ceiling are painted deepest midnight blue, and I don't see any windows, so either this room was purpose built—which in a new luxury house isn't unlikely—or the windows were plastered over at some point. Either way, my only possible escape route is through the door, and Geoffrey's between me and it. Not that I'd get far trying to run from a vampire, anyway.

Not unless I find a way to incapacitate him first.

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Chapter 31

My heartbeat picks up at the mere thought of trying to disable a vampire, and Geoffrey notices. He swings around and stalks across the room to stand over me.

"What are you doing?"

Fuck. "N-Nothing."

His eyes narrow. "Not planning to run?"

"How could I outrun a vampire?" I ask honestly. It's a genuine question, but I'm happy for him to think it's rhetorical.

He stares me down for a few seconds longer, then grunts. "Stay put, and I won't have to hurt you. At least, not yet."

Blood is pounding in my ears, but I force myself to breathe slowly. I need to stay calm. I need to *think*. Everything I've heard about Geoffrey paints him as the kind of vampire who'd happily hurt a human. Who'd happily *kill* a human—unless he needed them. It's pretty obvious that he kidnapped me to get at Tristan, but the fact that I'm still alive means that his plan is more complicated than just hurting Tristan's reputation. He's going to use me against my vampire… I just don't know how.

What I do know is that this has happened before and that Geoffrey knows exactly what happened to the vampires who kidnapped and murdered Benjamin. What makes him think that he'll be able to get away with this when they didn't? And why is he even bothering? What happened with Misha at the party last night proved that vampires respect the right of other vampires to protect their feeders. Geoffrey isn't going to build support

for Vampremacy this way—in fact, the opposite is true. Vampires will rally to Tristan and turn their backs on Vampremacy. So what's the poin—

Wait… weren't the vampires who took Benjamin the ones who made Geoffrey? Has this got nothing to do with Vampremacy at all?

"I'll be good," I whisper. "Just… I don't understand why. H-He doesn't care about me. I'm just his feeder." My own words slice into me, even more so because they're true. Tristan will come because I'm his feeder, but I didn't realise until now that maybe I want him to come for more reasons than that.

Geoffrey laughs, a low, mean sound, and I decide it doesn't matter why Tristan comes, as long as he gets me the fuck out of here.

"You don't understand *why*? What gives you the right to understand? Like you said, you're just a feeder. Fucking feeders," he adds. "You're leeches. You've weakened vampires, destroyed our heritage and turned us from hunters to lapdogs."

Great, Vampremacy rhetoric. Not helpful.

"You want to know why?" he snarls, so viciously that spit flies from his mouth and lands on me. Gross. "It's your own fault! You parasitic feeders who'll only contract for wealth and power. You Barale whores, who've spent the last three centuries selling yourselves to the highest bidders, whispering in influential ears, and creating a system that wipes out the birthright we deserve! Well, fuck you, feeder scum. We vampires are taking back what's ours, and when we do, feeders will finally be put in their place—bleeding beneath our heels."

He spins around and storms out of the room, slamming the door behind him, leaving me to blink after him in confusion. I know Vampremacy advocates for a return to the "old ways," where vampires hunt humans without regard for consent or whether they live afterward, but Geoffrey's little diatribe made it sound like he thinks feeders created the current system. Like we manipulated vampires to get it instituted and maintained.

Plus let's not forget that we prostitute ourselves for it. Did he mean that sexually or just in terms of exchanging blood for money?

It doesn't matter. I still don't know what Geoffrey thinks he can achieve by keeping me here. Tristan might be the regent of this region, but he can't dismantle a worldwide system that's been in place for centuries—and even if he could, he wouldn't. Which brings me back to the question: Why am I here?

I stay put for a long time, until my arse starts to go numb from sitting on the cold concrete, but Geoffrey doesn't come back. Eventually, I decide that if I'm going to be a prisoner, I may as well try to be comfortable, and painfully lever myself off the floor to go sit on one of the recliners.

There's no clock in this room, so I don't know what time it is or how long I've been here. I'm tired, but that could partly be from the shitty night I've had. It started off so well, too.

At one point I hear Geoffrey talking, though not clearly enough to make out the words, and I don't hear another voice. Is he on the phone? Not to Tristan, or he'd come back in here to make me scream.

And then silence falls again.

Sighing, I slowly turn my head from side to side. The dizziness and nausea aren't as bad, which is a definite win. Maybe I don't actually have a concussion. I'm still sore all over, though, and sitting on the floor for so long has made me stiffen up. That's not good. When Tristan gets here, I might need to be able to move fast.

Slowly, carefully, I get to my feet and start pacing up and down. My ribs hurt, and my knees, and my shoulder, and those pains don't lessen, but the stiffness in my muscles does loosen a bit after a couple of minutes.

All that work is for nothing when the door slams open and I tense into a giant knot.

"What are you doing?" Geoffrey snaps when his eyes land on me.

"Nothing. S-Stretching my legs." I stay frozen in place as he strides toward me.

"Planning to run?" He grabs my arm and yanks so hard, I feel the jolt through my whole body, stumbling as he drags me out of the room.

"No!" Oh god, is this it? Is he going to kill me now? I barely take in the rest of the house, desperately scrambling for a way to stall him as I trip twice on the stairs he hauls me up. Were we in a basement? We go down a corridor with a stupid number of doorways leading off it, and then Geoffrey shoves me into another room. This one has a wall of windows through which I can see the inky darkness outside—whatever time it is, it's still night. There's a huge sectional couch and an ultramodern coffee table, and the wall-mounted TV is so big that I want to make a dick joke about overcompensating. Though also, would a TV that big fit in my living room back at Tristan's house in Canterbury?

"Are you ready to scream?" Geoffrey asks, lifting his phone.

“Y—”

The windows blow in.

Instinctively, I drop, covering my head with my arms and biting back a scream as my already abused body hits the goddamn polished concrete floor. Whoever came up with the idea of putting concrete in houses instead of nice soft carpet is going on my enemies list.

With my head down, I can’t see what’s happening, but I hear shouts, snarls, and bodies colliding. It’s Tristan—I’m *sure* it is—so all I need to do is stay out of the way and wait for him to deal with Geoffrey. How close was that couch? I could hid—

Hands grab my upper arms and haul me upright, and even as my ribs scream at the sudden movement, I lash out, desperate to get away.

“It’s Pierce,” a familiar voice says into my ear. “Adam, it’s Pierce.”

I stop kicking and turn my head to look at him even as he carries me dizzyingly fast across the room toward the shattered floor-to-ceiling windows.

“Wait, no! We can’t leave without Tristan.”

Despite my protest, Pierce doesn’t stop until we’re clear of the house and off the deck that was outside the windows. Standing on the grass a good four metres away from the house, he sets me down—but keeps hold of my arm.

“Don’t even think of going back in there,” he warns. “My orders were to get you safe, and he’ll already be pissed that I let you stay this close.”

“I’ll stay with you,” I promise, my gaze locked onto the brightly lit room I just left. “Thank you.” It’s hard for me to tell exactly what’s going on because of motherfucking vampire speed, but they’re definitely still fighting. Two other vampires—one of whom was our driver earlier tonight—are there as well, one by the windows, the other by the door into the corridor. They’re watching the fight with their fangs out and an intensity that makes my balls try to crawl back into my body. “Tristan’s winning, right?”

Pierce scoffs. “Of course. He’s playing with him.” He hesitates, then leans close and whispers very softly, “Are you hurt?”

I know why he’s being sneaky—if Tristan hears that I’m hurt, it could distract him. Or he could go completely ape-shit on Geoffrey, though as far as I’m concerned, that wouldn’t be a bad thing.

Not taking my eyes off the blurred fight, I nod slowly, and Pierce swears. “Hospital?” he whispers.

I want to say no, but I probably should check if I have a concussion. Plus, I’d *really* appreciate some painkillers. I don’t think Panadol and Nurofen are going to do the trick. “Probably.”

“Tristan, get it done,” he calls, as calmly as if Tristan’s filing paperwork. Not that I think Tristan’s ever filed paperwork a day in his life. Even when he was working with the Council, I’m pretty sure he had a lackey.

What the fuck am I thinking?

“Can I sit down?” My knees really don’t want to hold me up anymore, and I don’t love the idea of dangling from where Pierce is still holding my arm.

“Fuck,” he mutters, lowering me to sit on the grass. I sway a little, then lie back, turning my head so I can still see what’s happening in the house.

They’ve stopped racing around now, and Tristan has Geoffrey pressed up against a wall. There’s blood all over Geoffrey’s face, and his left arm is hanging awkwardly at his side—dislocated shoulder, probably. Those hurt like a bitch, and I smile.

Geoffrey’s shaking his head, his expression twisted—with fear? Hatred? Both? Tristan must be talking, but I’m too far to hear what he’s saying with my regular human hearing. Plus, my ears are ringing a bit. Maybe I do have a concussion. Or I could just be exhausted.

“Got time for a nap?” I ask Pierce, surprised when it comes out slurred.

“Stay awake,” he says sharply. “Tristan.”

As if in response, Tristan lifts a hand and rips out Geoffrey’s throat. Blood sprays as he tosses aside the chunk of gory flesh and steps back, and Geoffrey’s body collapses to the floor.

“Hah! See how he likes concrete.”

Tristan’s head turns our way, and even with blood splattered across his face, I can see his brows drawing together. He bends, hauls Geoffrey’s body up, and then twists his head around, yanking at the same time until it separates from his body.

Bile fills my mouth. As much as I hated Geoffrey, I didn’t need to watch that.

Tristan tosses the head to one of the other vampires and gives some orders, then grabs a blanket from the back of the couch and wipes the blood

off his face and hands as he walks toward us.

He’s getting closer and closer, but somehow it’s getting darker and darker out here. I blink, trying to clear my vision.

“Adam?” He bends and lays a gentle hand against my cheek. I try to smile, but it’s too much effort.

My eyes slide closed.

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Chapter 32

My drift back to consciousness this time is much better. For one thing, I wake up knowing I'm safe. A voice is telling me so.

My eyelids feel glued closed, but I determinedly peel them open. I need to see who it is telling me over and over again, "You're safe, you're going to be okay, it's safe to wake up."

The overhead lights immediately make me regret my idiotic decision to open my eyes, and I flinch, squeezing them closed again.

"Adam?" The voice is concerned now. "Turn off the overhead light," it orders, and a second later the brightness pressing against my lids lessens. I crack open one eye, just enough to see that the light is a lot dimmer now, then cautiously open both.

"You're awake," the voice says with a hefty note of relief. "Anna, let Tristan know."

I blink at Clive and wonder if I'm still unconscious. Is this some kind of coma dream? It's not that I think Clive hates me—much—or that he'd do me any harm, but if someone had said he'd sit by my bedside and tell my unconscious self that I'm safe, I would have laughed it off.

A shadow falls over me, and I move my gaze to Anna's face. "Hi," she whispers. "You're awake. Okay. I'll be back." She disappears, and I turn back to Clive.

"What—" I stop and clear my throat, which is so dry it hurts. Clive reaches for a cup.

"Do you want some water?"

I nod, but when I try to sit up, pain slices through me like a lightning strike. The sound I make is half gasp, half moan.

“Lie still,” Clive orders sharply. “You have three broken ribs.”

Staring up at him through the tears in my eyes, I mutter, “Fuck.”

“Pretty much. Don’t move. I’ll adjust the bed so you can drink.”

Two minutes later, I let my aching head fall back against the pillow, grateful for water, beds that rise, and whatever painkillers the hospital has me on. I’m definitely on something, because the sharp pain in my side lessened to a dull throb too quickly for it to be natural.

“How long was I asleep?” I ask Clive.

“Not long—about four hours. You have a concussion and a cracked kneecap as well as the ribs, and the doctor mentioned something about cognitive tests.” He pauses. “You know who you are, I’m guessing?”

I manage a nod. “I remember everything, I think. Tristan ki—uh, took care of Geoffrey, right?” Belatedly I realise that a hospital probably isn’t a great place to talk about killing people.

“Yes. You passed out, and he and Pierce brought you here, to St. Vincent’s. Adam…” He leans forward, his face pale and eyes intent. “You’re safe now. Whatever he did to you, it’s over.”

My brain is fogged by pain and concussion, but it’s impossible to miss Clive’s concern. Carefully, I lift my hand and reach out to take his. The way he clings to me is a surprise, and not for the first time, I wonder what his story is. Somehow, I get the feeling it’s not a nice one.

“He didn’t… I’m okay, Clive. He kicked me, and I think he might have dropped me on my head, but he didn’t do anything other than that.” The deep relief on his face makes me hate myself for every single thing I’ve done to irritate him. “I’m glad you’re here,” I add impulsively, and he gives me a shaky smile.

“You’ll change your mind about that before you’re healed,” he predicts. “I plan to make you follow doctor’s orders to the letter.”

Before I have time to consider the implications of that, Anna comes back in, followed by two strangers.

“Welcome back, Adam,” one of them says, coming toward me with a nice smile. “I’m your doctor, Samantha, and this is Lisa, the nurse who’ll be taking care of you. How are you feeling?”

“I’m not my best self right now,” I admit, and she pulls a sympathetic face.

“I’ll bet, and I’m sorry to be the one to tell you that life isn’t going to be fun while those ribs are healing.”

Great. “I figured.”

“I’m going to ask your friends to step out while I examine you—”

“No, can they stay? Uh… I don’t need to get naked or anything, do I?” Though I’m in a hospital gown, so clearly someone’s already seen most of my body.

“No nudity,” she promises. “Mostly these will be cognitive tests, though if you hurt anywhere other than your ribs, head, and knees, we’d like to know where.”

I sigh. “You’re going to shine a light in my eyes, aren’t you? That’s what they do on TV.”

Her mouth twitches. “Only for a few seconds.”

“Let’s get it over with, then.”



WHEN SAMANTHA and Lisa eventually leave, Anna and Clive crowd around the bed.

“Where’s Tristan?” I ask, trying not to sound as needy and fretful as I feel. I’m sure he’s busy, what with having to deal with the fallout of killing another vampire. Vampremacy are probably going to use this against him. Still, it would have been nice if he’d hung around until I woke up.

“Downstairs,” Anna tells me. “Jes and Alan got here about forty-five minutes ago with the stuff they found at Geoffrey’s place. He’s talking to them now, but he’ll be back up here soon. Pierce is in the lounge two doors down, keeping an ear on everything.”

I blink a few times, trying to make that make sense. “Why isn’t he in here?”

She glances at Clive. “We weren’t sure if you’d want him to be.”

“We didn’t know if waking up to a vampire in the room would distress you,” Clive adds, and I remember our conversation right after I woke up.

“Thanks, but it’s okay. Could you ask Pierce to come in? I want to know what happened.”

Anna shrugs. “If that’s what you want.”

A second later, there's a light tap on the doorframe, and Pierce leans in. "Hi. Are you sure—"

"Please get in here. My head hurts too much to have this argument thirty times."

That gets me a round of frowns. "Remember what the doctor said about the morphine button," Clive lectures. "Pain control is important for your ribs so you don't risk lung issues."

"I remember," I promise and dutifully push the little button. The doctor assured me it wasn't possible to overdose myself, and I'm sore from all the prodding she did and the thinking she made me do. "Okay, so tell me what happened last night. Geoffrey took me from my grandparents' house—has someone called them, by the way?" I might only have met them once, but I already know they're the kind to worry.

"I spoke to them while we were bringing you here, and then Anna called with an update once the doctor had seen you," Pierce assures me.

"I also just texted to let them know you're awake, and they'd like you to call when you're feeling up to it," she adds.

"Thank you. Everyone's okay, right? Geoffrey didn't hurt anyone when he took me?"

"They're fine—angry, but fine. From what I've heard, your grandparents have roused the Association and every feeder family around the globe. Kidnapping a feeder is a stupid thing to do. Kidnapping a feeder from an influential family like yours goes far beyond stupid." Pierce shakes his head. "Doing so when the feeder is at his family home, surrounded by other contracted feeders… well, that's the kind of thing that destroys lineages."

I think about that. "Does it also destroy sociopolitical movements?"

He shrugs. "In this case, I'd say yes. Geoffrey was the face of Blood Reign, and his death would have been a hefty blow to their momentum in any case. His death under these circumstances paints the whole movement with tainted colours. Three of your cousins who were there last night are contracted to vampires who don't appreciate having their feeders put at risk, even tangentially. The vampires who formerly had contracts with your aunts, uncles, and grandparents maintain fondness for them and dislike that humans under their protection were subjected to a violation of their safety. That's a lot of vampires who collectively wield a great deal of power and

now have a strong grudge against Blood Reign. It would be difficult to gain the kind of support they need—or any."

"Good," Clive mutters, but I frown.

"Then why did Geoffrey do it? From some of the things he said, he hated feeders. Why would he risk destroying his chance of getting rid of the institution of feeders?"

"It would seem he hated me more." Tristan's voice flows over me like a cool shower on a hot day, making all the sharp edges of the world retreat with a soothing balm. I look over to where he's standing in the doorway, looking way more rumpled than I've ever seen him. Even with messy hair and wearing someone else's clothes—because there's no fucking way I believe those jeans and T-shirt are his—he's still the most put-together, elegant man I've ever met. Aka the stick is still firmly lodged in his arse.

I'm so glad he's here.

"Nice outfit," I say. He shudders lightly, glancing down at himself.

"I apologise for appearing en déshabillé. My clothing was bloody."

"I don't even know what that means," I admit, "but this is a good look for you."

His eyes narrow, and Pierce hurries to interject. "Since you weren't bleeding, we thought it best that Tristan change before we got here. The story we told was that you were attacked by thieves on your way to meet us for a drink."

Tristan comes into the room, and for the first time, I notice he's holding something in his hands. A book.

"What's that?"

"Geoffrey's journal."

My jaw drops. "You're taking the piss. He kept a *journal*?" Villain keeps journal is such a cliché.

"A notebook, perhaps. He kept rather meticulous notes of meetings, plans, ideas, and his opinions of me." He opens the book, leafs through a few pages, and then turns it to show us. The top half of the page is filled with neat handwriting and a bulleted list, and the bottom half has vicious block letters declaring TRISTAN MUST DIE. The pen scored through the page in two places, so he must have been fucking pissed when he was writing it.

"That's disturbing," Anna says, leaning closer. "He seems to have interrupted himself midsentence to add that note." She frowns. "That's not

sane, is it?”

Tristan shrugs. “Sanity or lack thereof is not my area of expertise. I haven’t yet read the entire book, but it’s full of similar asides. He appears to have loathed me and feeders in equal measure.”

A million questions swarm into my brain, but before I can ask any of them, Tristan continues, “I would appreciate a private moment with Adam.”

Clive’s immediately on his feet. “Of course. I’m going to go back to the house and get some clothes for you both. Would you like me to arrange a temp for this evening?”

I want to protest, but Tristan’s already saying, “Yes, please,” and then the room empties out and he closes the door.

As he returns to my side and sits in the chair Clive just vacated, I argue, “You don’t need a temp. The doctor said I can go home as soon as they cast my leg, and that should be this afternoon.”

“You’re injured, Adam. Even if I wasn’t contractually prohibited from feeding from you when you’re not in optimal health, I wouldn’t. You need your blood right now.”

“But—”

“It’s not open for debate. I will not feed from you until I’m satisfied that your health is substantially improved.”

Clenching my teeth makes my head hurt more. “How long will that be?”

He shrugs. Damn him.

“Thank you.” I change the subject. “For coming after me last night, I mean. Knowing that you’d come was the only thing that kept me from freaking out.” My gaze meets his, and I’m surprised by the intensity there. Tristan’s always so good at maintaining his control, but he’s not even bothering to try right now.

“I will always come for you.” The low murmur of his voice skitters down my spine, warming parts of me it has no business touching. “You belong to me, and anyone who touches you will not live to regret it.”

Suddenly it’s hard to breathe, and not because of my ribs. “Tristan—”

“We should speak about the incident after the DeMartes’ party,” he interrupts, and the possessive heat that was in his eyes a second ago is gone, his usual walls firmly in place. “It was a tumultuous evening for you, and I made an error by agreeing to feed from your neck. That can evoke strong physical and emotional responses even in the most controlled, experienced feeders, and I think we both know that you were neither on that evening.”

“An error…? Wait, you’re saying it was a mistake?”

His brow rises. “Don’t you agree?”

I don’t know how to answer that. “I know I crossed a line,” I begin. “You didn’t consent to me kissing you, and I’m sorry for that. But you feeding from my neck wasn’t a mistake. It was amazing.” I grab my courage with both hands. “I want to do it again. *All* of it.”

For what feels like an eternity, he says nothing, watching me with those guarded eyes. I try to keep my breathing even and look back at him, but deep down inside, the part of me that knows I’m his prey can’t maintain that kind of eye contact, and for a split second, my gaze flicks away.

“When you’re healed,” he says at last, “if you wish for me to try feeding from your neck again, we can discuss it. Of course, such feedings would occur within the boundaries of our contractual agreement.”

Disappointment, only slightly tinged with relief, floods me. His message is clear: Nothing personal can happen between us. No kissing. Definitely nothing more than kissing.

“Sure.”

He stands. “I have matters to attend to and a call with the Council this evening. Anna and Pierce will remain here to ensure your safety. If you need anything, you have only to ask.”

I nod, and he leans over and places a chaste kiss on my forehead.

“Rest. Heal. We will remain here in Sydney until you feel strong enough to travel.”

“I’ll ask the doctor,” I mutter, suddenly wanting more than anything to be home at Blackwood Place.

Tristan leaves without a backward glance—ouch—and less than a minute later, Anna and Pierce come back.

“You good?” Anna asks, and I nod, feeling a bit silly. So Tristan doesn’t want me that way—so what? Half the time I’m not even sure if I like him, and hooking up with a vampire has to be the stupidest fucking idea any human ever had. Right?

Meanwhile, I have a high-paying job, a great place to live, and a long-lost family who want to get to know me. Not to mention, I’ve barely scratched the surface of the fascinating world of vampires and feeders.

I lay my head back and close my eyes, ready for some of that rest the doctor and Tristan want me to get. I’m going to need it if I want to keep my job as a feeder.

Which I do.



Thanks for reading *The Feeder Legacy*! I hope you loved this new world of mine.
Adam's story continues in *The Feeder Defence*, where he learns more about the machinations of vampire society and the mysterious Helsing Sect.

We talk spoilers in my Facebook reader group, RoMMance with Becca & Louisa.
Or you can subscribe to my newsletter to get all updates and access to bonus scenes: https://bit.ly/LouisaMBonus.

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About the Author

Louisa Masters started reading romance much earlier than her mother thought she should. As an adult, she feeds her addiction in every spare second. She spent years trying to build a “sensible” career, working in bookstores, recruitment, resource management, administration, and as a travel agent before finally conceding defeat and devoting herself to the world of romance novels.

Louisa has a long list of places first discovered in books that she wants to visit, and every so often she overcomes her loathing of jet lag and takes a trip that charges her imagination. She lives in Melbourne, Australia, where she whines about the weather for most of the year while secretly admitting she’ll probably never move.

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